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JUNE 1985
VOLUME 49
NUMBER 6
ISSN 0026-3621

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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol 49, No. 6, June 1985. Published monthly by Renown Publications, Inc., 18309 Sherman Way, Suite C, Reseda, CA 91335. Subscription: One Year (12 issues) $18.00; Two Years (24 issues) $32.00; Canada, One Year $21.00; Two Years $38.00; Foreign, One Year $24.00; Two Years $40.00 (U.S. Funds Only). Second Class postage paid at Reseda, CA, and at additional mailing offices. Events and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. NOTE TO CONTRIBUTORS: All submissions should be sent to the editor at Renown Publications, P.O. Box 178, Reseda, CA 91335. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited materials. All manuscripts, photos and artwork must be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope of sufficient size to return the materials submitted. All material accepted for publication will be paid for at our usual rates. Copyright ©1985 by Renown Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the international and Pan-American Conventions. Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster — return P.O. Box 178, Reseda, CA 91335.

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

THE STING OF DEATH

by Brett Halliday

Something mysterious and frightening was going on in the jet-set world she had just entered, and if Mike Shayne wouldn't look into it, then Lucy knew she had to. She never dreamed it might cause the redheaded private eye's death! 4

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The rift between Mike and Lucy had never been greater, and it looked as though it might not heal. This was one time she couldn't plan on his help. She would have to handle the situation herself!

The Sting of Death

by BRETT HALLIDAY

LUCY HAMILTON CLOSED HER EYES AND IMAGINED A palm-lined beach, warm and silky sand squishing beneath her feet, and just enough cool salt water lapping over her body to keep her from overheating. And of course Michael would be there, his taut muscles straining against his tanned chest, his powerful arm around her, that crescent scar on his shoulder he never would explain, and his deep voice whispering things to her like . . .

"Angel, what in hell are you doing out there? I need the Cope file in my office now."

Her eyes snapped open. The outer office to MICHAEL SHAYNE, INVESTIGATIONS was as full as she had ever seen it. Things certainly had been easier when they first started and maybe one or two customers walked in per week. Now, the potential clients squatted in the three chairs, crowded the overstuffed couch that needed upholstering, even perched on the window ledge. The place looked more like a free clinic in Overtown.

Another blue Monday. Pulling the manila file out of the paper-filled tray on her desk, she stepped over a lanky pair of legs that belonged to a writer who claimed he had come all the way from Azle, Texas, to beg Mike to let him do a story about the redhead's exploits. Well, to persuade the redhead, Mr. James was going to have to be quite a reasoner.

Mike Shayne sat at his desk rotating his neck and kneading the muscles. Bags had ballooned under his eyes, and she could see the red lines running through his steel-grays from across the room. She handed him the file and nodded at the bearded man in denim who sat across from the tired investigator.

The detective pulled out a green sheet, scanned it quickly, and handed it back. "Lucy, this is Mr. Cope from Winchester, Kentucky."

"I remember," she said, trying to sound sweet.

"He's a singer at the El Paso Cafe on the Beach and had his guitar

stolen. I've agreed to help him find it. Have him sign the standard contract." The redhead stood up and shook Cope's hand.

As Lucy led the denim-clad singer out of the room, she heard her boss say to no one in particular, "It sure was easier before Tim wrote those articles."

"Amen," she said under her breath. For years Michael had allowed his good friend Tim Rourke to write up his cases on one condition—that they appear as fiction. Sometime last month the columnist for the *Miami Daily News* had started persuading her boss to do a series of true-to-life accounts of his cases, changing only the names of the real people involved to protect them both legally. After a period of courtship that had included a case of Martell, steak and seafood dinners at all the city's best restaurants, and a fishing junket to the Bahamas, the detective had succumbed.

What was it that French king had said? "After me, the deluge." Well, a steady stream of clients had flooded through the door, and now Michael had so many offers he seemed to be drowning under the caseload.

She handed Cope the form and marked with penciled X's where he was to sign. She had raised Michael's rates and per diems, but still the customers flocked around. Her boss had become a celebrity. Even the local television and radio stations were hounding him for interviews. He kept saying no, but every now and then a supposed client turned out to be a reporter.

The door opened. She glanced at her watch. 5:15. "I'm sorry," she announced to the newcomer, "but the office is closed. If you'd like to make an appointment?"

A heavy-set man who looked to her like an ex-pug pivoted. "No, just tell, Mike, his old friend Travis from Fort Lauderdale dropped in. I'll catch the star later."

She took the papers from Cope and filed them.

"Send in the next one, Angel," came Shayne's tired voice over the intercom.

Lucy pulled out a file. "Mr. Fritch," she said, handing it to a man in dark glasses and a Hawaiian shirt, "you're welcome to try, but I don't think Mr. Shayne's going to go for your idea of a documentary on him."

"Babes," he said, "as we say in Hollywood, it's not over till it's in the can."

That sounded to her like something they said on the West Coast. She had just turned back to the Apple IIe when the phone rang.

"Michael Shayne, Investigations. Miss Hamilton speaking. May I

help you."

"Lucifer, you old devil," said a caller.

The female voice dragged Lucy Hamilton back into the past, back to New Orleans, back to a time before she had known Shayne. "Ronnie," she said with surprise as only one person had ever called her by that name. "It's been almost . . . "

"I must see you, Lucifer. I'm at the Grand Hotel."

"In Coconut Grove. Ronnie, I'd love to, but Michael is really swamped now."

"Please."

The brunette secretary counted six people still waiting to get in. "I doubt I'll be through here till 7:00. Then the drive."

"8:00 dinner. On me."

"O.K. For old times sake."

"There's a lot more at stake than that."

IT WAS CLOSER TO 9:00 WHEN LUCY HAMILTON ARRIVED at the restaurant of the Grand Hotel. The guy from Tinseltown had refused to take no for an answer until Michael had made him an offer he couldn't refuse—if he left immediately, the detective wouldn't beat him to a pulp. Her composure now wasn't much better than her boss's famed Irish temper.

How long it had been since she had seen Veronique Dessaints, the brunette didn't know, but it wasn't difficult to recognize her. Sitting in the middle of the plush room—where she could attract the most attention, no doubt—her old friend stood out in a white dress, white jacket, and a matching hat. Her thick, dark hair was still cut short. *"Gamine,"* her very proper Cajun father had called her before kicking her out of their home overlooking Lake Ponchartrain.

Veronique stood up and hugged her tightly as though no time had passed between their last meeting. She noticed the fragrance. Ronnie had moved up a step or two in perfumes.

"Hello, roomie," said Lucy as they untangled and sat down. "Before you say anything, I've got to know what happened to that pilot you ran off to Mexico with."

Veronique inserted a cigarette in the end of a silver holder and said matter-of-factly, "He died six months later in a small resort town of cancer."

"I'm so sorry."

"You are! He left me to pay the bill." The smile settled between irony and a smirk.

"Same old Ronnie."

"And you, I heard you met Mr. Perfect. Did you marry him?"

"No, I work for him."

"I wasn't talking about that scruffy private eye. I meant Jason."

"Let's make a deal. I won't ask you any more about Mexico and you don't ask me about Jason."

They ordered white wine and some vegetable hors d'oeuvres. Lucy stared at the thick tan that covered her friend's face, then resisted an impulse to check out the lines on her own in her compact.

"Let's talk about the present," said Veronique as the wine arrived in a small bottle.

Lucy took one look at the label and said, "You must be doing very well."

"If I were, honey, I'd have ordered a large bottle." She smiled again. "Life has been *tres, tres* good to me . . . and *tres, tres* bad. Which do you want to hear about first?"

"The bad, of course," laughed Lucy.

"My first husband made me very wealthy with our divorce."

"What's bad about oodles of money?"

"That's coming. My second husband spent it all."

"All?"

"Most. I helped with the rest."

Lucy couldn't help but notice her friend's mood swings. Veronique had always lived in peaks and valleys, but now they were more pronounced. She decided to change the subject. "What are you doing in Miami, Ronnie?"

"I'm here with Victor."

"Who's Victor?"

"A very handsome and distinguished man I met in Haiti while recovering from my last divorce."

Lucy refilled their glasses. "What does Victor do?"

"His business card says he's in real estate."

The brunette picked up the hesitancy in her friend's voice. "You don't sound . . . convinced."

Veronique's well-tanned hand began to tremble so that she spilled wine on the linen table-cloth. "I'm not. You see, over the past few months I've come to believe what Victor really does is kill people."

II

LUCY HAMILTON SLOWLY PLACED HER WINE GLASS ON the linen table cloth. Years ago she had learned not to react too quickly to anything her friend said. The Ronnie she remembered had always combined a flair for the melodramatic with an intense desire to shock

those around her. The brunette recalled all too well how many times in the past she had been the butt of her friend's "wit."

Once, when they were sharing the Bourbon Street efficiency, Ronnie had come home late from her night class at the university. Over a cup of herbal tea she had nonchalantly mentioned that Professor Cole had asked for a rewrite of her latest short story and for her to move in with him. What should she do? For a week, Lucy remembered, she had wrestled with Ronnie's decision. Finally, when they sat down for a serious discussion, Ronnie kicked off her sandals and just as casually remarked, "Hey, Lucifer, I was just kidding about me and the prof." Then, the dark-haired woman arched an eyebrow and flashed the now-familiar "Got you again" smile.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?" Ronnie interrupted.

"What do you want me to say?"

"What do you mean?"

"Should I pretend that we're still roommates and I'm playing straight man to another of your practical jokes."

"Dammit, Lucy, I'm not kidding."

Lucy was very much aware that her friend had used her first name, and she couldn't recall the last time Ronnie had done that. She looked straight into the eyes of the woman across the table. "If you're not kidding, we'd better talk."

"Why do you think I got you here?"

Maybe working for Michael so long had rubbed off on her. Keeping the cynicism out of her voice was impossible. "Maybe you haven't had a good laugh in a while."

Ronnie looked suddenly hurt. Her lips retracted and her head drooped.

"If this is a joke," Lucy continued, "I want it to stop now. We're older than we used to be, and you don't all of a sudden drop in on somebody just because you haven't reached your prank quota for the month."

"I know that." The dark-haired woman reached out and took Lucy's right hand. "Believe me, I'm a different person than I was, and I'm not kidding."

The brunette could feel her old friend's hand moist and warm, trembling in her own like a newly-hatched fledgling. Either her friend had become a consummate actress or was sincerely scared. "What do you want me to do?"

"When we flew into town from Paris a few days ago, I felt so all alone. Then, while Victor was setting up another of his meetings yesterday, I picked up one of your city's newspapers. I don't know why I

read that column, but it was about a private detective in Miami who sounds very good at his job. Lo and behold, I noticed he had a secretary named Lucy Hamilton. Was it the same Lucy? Finally I took a chance and called. The minute you picked up the phone I recognized your voice. And, Lucy, I don't think I thanked you enough."

"For coming or being the secretary to Michael Shayne?"

A tear formed in the corner of the well-made-up eyes of Veronique. She pulled out a lace handkerchief. Long fingers dabbed carefully. Her mascara seemingly more important than her composure, she said, "For being you. My rock." She paused. "Look, I'm desperate. I just didn't know where to turn. It's almost like fate."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you believe that, well, sometimes things just happen for a reason? I mean, when I opened that newspaper, it was Kismet, Karma. I could have read anything, but my eyes were drawn to that column."

"O.K.," said Lucy, not wishing to argue the unarguable, "why don't you tell me a little about this Victor of yours."

Ronnie turned up the crystal wine glass and drained it. Then she signaled a water. "A bottle of your finest Chablis."

Before the waiter arrived, Lucy said, "Ronnie, I didn't have time for lunch today, and I'm feeling a little light-headed already. Do you mind if we eat while we talk instead?"

"But of course," said the dark-haired woman.

They ordered Shrimp Creole as a reminder of "the good old days," as Ronnie put it, when they used to fix it together, always putting in too much curry. While they waited and chatted, Lucy forgot her diet and emptied a plate of batter-fried vegetables. "I'm sure even Jane Fonda goes on binges," she rationalized aloud. "Now tell me about the man in your life."

"I met Victor a year ago by the pool at the Club Coral Reef in Port-au-Prince. What a body! I thought he just had to be a lifeguard of a professional athlete on vacation." She took a sip of water. "He invited me to go scuba diving off the beach, and, well, one thing led to another and . . . "

"Tell me about the another," grinned Lucy.

"You see, Victor was so charming, so eager to please. He planned things for us to do every day so I wouldn't have time to think about the divorce. He listened when I wanted to talk, and he wasn't afraid of silence. He even saw to it that my lawyer didn't try to take advantage of me during the proceedings."

"He sounds like a dream come true."

"I thought he was, but it's the very thing that drew me to him that

scares me now."

"What's that?"

"His force, his power. Victor can enter a room and you feel it. I can still remember the time after the Biltmore party. We had just walked down to Grand Central Station. It was late. The man came from behind one of those lockers. His right hand stayed in his trenchcoat pocket. Said he wanted all our money and the diamond necklace Victor had bought me earlier in the day at Tiffany's. Lucy, Victor just looked at him, almost for a minute. Then he said to the bum, 'You don't want to do this.' That's all."

"What happened?"

"Victor's eyes seemed to mesmerize the man. The bum turned and started running. I've never seen anything like it."

"This power of his," said the brunette, "has he ever done anything to you personally?"

"Not unless I wanted him to." She smiled suggestively. "But then I've never crossed him either."

"Just because a man possesses some sort of hardboiled charisma doesn't mean he kills people. Michael, the man I work for, has nearly the same ability, but . . . "

"He's killed people, hasn't he?"

The brunette was momentarily flustered. "Yes, but not because he wanted to—because he had to."

"But he *did* kill?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure Victor has too, but not out of necessity."

"What do you mean?"

"I think he kills for pleasure, for money."

"An assassin, a paid killer?"

"Yes, and a very expensive one judging from our lifestyle."

"It must be more than expensive living that causes you to make such a judgment."

"Last week we were staying at the George V in Paris. Early one morning he woke me up and said we had to go. We didn't even pack. He said he'd send for our luggage or buy some replacements. Two hours later we were on the Concorde headed for New York."

"Maybe he had some business suddenly come up," Lucy volunteered.

Ronnie reached into her clutch purse. "Two days later I picked up a copy of the international edition of *The New York Times*. I found this." She offered a piece of torn and folded newsprint.

The brunette opened the paper. A bold-print headline announced:

CZECH AMBASSADOR SLAIN. The dateline was Paris, a week ago.

III

LUCY FOUND HERSELF LAUGHING ALOUD, OUT OF RELIEF. "Is that all?"

"But . . . "

"You mean you're basing your whole theory that your Victor is some kind of killer on the mere coincidence that he rushed you out of a hotel on the same day that someone was assassinated in a city the size of Paris?"

"Well . . . "

"Hmmm, there are eight murders per day in Miami. My boss deals with crime all the time. So by your logic every time Michael does something out of the ordinary I should worry that he's a murderer?"

"I see you've become a real logician since our Mardi Gras days." She stuck a cigarette into her silver filter. "It's more than that."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm almost positive that I met Ambassador Smed, the man who was killed in Paris, a few days earlier at one of Victor's little investment parties. And the other day when I was sending Victor's tweed suit to the cleaners, I found an address. I checked. It was to the Czech embassy."

"That doesn't prove anything. Victor probably needed the address to invite the ambassador."

"Maybe, but it's enough to keep me scared." She lit her cigarette with a silver lighter whose flame flickered with uncertainty. "If you knew Victor the way I do, if you could see those eyes that fix . . . wait a minute! Tomorrow night upstairs in our suite he's having another of his *soirees*. Lucy, would you come?"

The brunette hesitated.

"Oh, please. Promise me you'll show."

"What time?"

"9:00."

WHEN SHE ARRIVED AT THE FLAGLER STREET OFFICE AT 7:35 the next morning, Lucy Hamilton felt a twinge in her stomach. And it was more than indigestion or guilt over stuffing herself with Shrimp Creole.

The door was unlocked.

What should she do? Cautiously she turned the knob and inched the door open. From Michael's inner sanctum, she heard a noise. She knew she should turn around, but the logic that had served her so well the night before at dinner deserted her.

She entered. A shadow fell on the frosted glass. Maybe she should have listened to Michael as well as Will Gentry and carried a gun, but the shiny pistol the redhead had given her was gathering dust between the hatboxes in her closet.

The file drawer opened from within. She should backtrack and call the police from down the hall.

The rustle of paper startled her.

She cracked the inner door and looked in.

A large figure in a wrinkled white Oxford hunched over Michael's desk. Suddenly it straightened up and turned toward her.

"Angel, where in hell is the Cope file?"

"Michael," she exclaimed, her heart fluttering. "What are you doing here this time of morning? You never come in before 8:30."

"I didn't today either."

"What?"

"I never went home last night, and the pile of paper on my desk is still half way to the ceiling. Say, do you think we can get the phone company to give us an unlisted number?"

"All this notoriety will pass. Tomorrow the press will choose another darling." She dropped into the chair reserved for clients. "I can remember when we sat and played gin rummy while waiting for the phone to ring."

"I guess you're right." He lay down on the green industrial carpet and began doing push-ups. "What's on tap the rest of the week, as if I didn't have enough already?"

She returned with the appointment calendar. "Let me see. Not counting the usual drop-ins, you've only got a few obligations. Tomorrow there's that luncheon with the Mayor's Crime Task Force."

"I don't know what'll be harder to swallow—the rubber chicken or the platitudes."

"From there you're booked on that TV talk show at 7:00."

"Phil Donahue?"

"No. You know, that new guy from up North. Rex Rhodes, his, what does he call it . . . *Rex's Roundtable.*" She ran her pen down the scribbled page. "Oh, you're also helping that P.I. from Boston try to get a line on the woman who left him."

"Oh, yeah," said Shayne. "What a pain in the neck. That guy thinks he knows everything from ethnic cooking to boxing."

"Thursday at 10:00," Lucy continued, "Tim comes by to talk to with you about next Monday's column."

"Yeah. Says he wants to do a follow-up to the Beach Butcher case. I don't even like to think about that one."

"Friday's the trial. Gar Ragland called from the DEA to say he's depending on you to testify against Ricardo Givan. He said don't forget to drop by the courtroom around 11:00."

"Forget," said the redhead, picking up a folded paper from his littered desk. "He sent me this little subpoena as a more definite reminder. I'd almost rather talk to our Knight-errant from Boston than to hang out all morning at the Federal Court Building just to testify for two or three minutes. Sometimes they don't even call you to the stand, but you waste half a day."

"I hope you get out before 1:00 because then you're scheduled to talk to Mr. Hopewell of the Third Floridian S&L about their security system."

Shayne held up his hand. "No more. I surrender."

Lucy closed the appointment calendar. As Shayne continued sorting through the file, she debated whether to ask him for advice about Ronnie's situation. "Michael."

He didn't respond.

"Michael."

"Yeah," he said under his breath, his eyes never moving.

"It's about . . . it's about . . . time to start up the old Proctor-Silex." She walked back into the outer office. As she filled the glass pot with water, she wondered what Michael would do in her situation. If it were an old friend of his, would he investigate? Would he write it off as the overactive imagination of a woman who has been hurt one too many times? Would he go to the party and meet the man in question before deciding? Well, she hadn't committed herself to attending tonight.

Lucy watched the dark liquid filter slowly into the pot. It was like the old Chinese water torture. Pull yourself together, girl, she told herself. The whole thing is probably nothing.

She placed the steaming mug of coffee in front of the heavy-eyed detective. It could have been a bowl of Alpo for all the notice he took.

"Is there something you want, Angel?" he said. "You've been standing there in a daze for ten minutes."

"Oh, no," she said. "Nothing important."

He turned back to the file.

"Michael, I have a friend who's worried about this man she met a year ago."

"Hmmm," said the redhead absent-mindedly.

"She thinks he might be involved in a murder."

"That's nice."

"She feels that"—he wasn't paying a bit of attention to her—" the man smuggled an atom bomb into DisneyWorld just to assassinate

Mickey Mouse."

"You don't say," said Shayne, continuing to page through the report.

That was it! She pivoted toward the door. She would have to handle the situation herself.

IV

LUCY STEPPED PAST THE DOORMAN WHO HAD CALLED UP to Ronnie's penthouse suite. As the doors closed and the elevator started upward, she made a last-minute check of her make-up in the compact mirror. A quick touch-up of cherry-red brightened her lips, and few strokes of pink blush accented her high cheekbones. Wet fingertips smoothed out her eyebrows.

She didn't know exactly what to expect. Ronnie had simply said dress was formal. Was the deep-veed, cherry dress too short? It cut right above her knee, showing a lot of lightly-tinted hose. Dust still sat on the open-toed spikes that hadn't left her closet for months. Large, gold earrings swung freely, expressing the way she felt at the moment.

How different. Most of her recent nights-out had been with Michael. To him, formal meant a woman wore a skirt instead of jeans. And he didn't like a lot of make-up. Said it took away from her natural beauty and made her look too much like his friend Jerry King's play-for-pay ladies.

Face it, Luce, she told herself as she turned her hair upside down and shook it, you're in a rut. There's more to an evening on the town than steak and onions in the back booth at The Beef House. Look upon this as an opportunity to expand your horizons, a golden opportunity.

Then why did she feel so nervous, perhaps even a bit guilty? She licked her lips and pulled down on her dress.

Motown music, thick smoke, and Ronnie greeted her as the elevator doors opened. She was dressed in a sheer black gown that clung to all the right curves in all the right places, and she was wearing a necklace with some of the largest pearls Lucy had ever seen.

Ronnie embraced her. "I'm so glad you could make it."

Momentarily caught in a surprisingly constricting squeeze, Lucy jumped back.

"You O.K.?" said the dark-haired woman.

"Yes," said Lucy, examining her friend. Midnight-blue eyeshadow tightly flecked with silver, upswept hair, and the perfectly outlined lips suggested Ronnie had spent the afternoon, if not the day, with a cosmetologist. "You've come a long way, baby."

"From being kicked out of the family manor by dear old dad to tak-

ing over the penthouse suite." She slipped a bare, well-tanned arm into Lucy's. "Come on. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

As they started across the lavish living room on a Persian rug, a voice from behind said, *"Veronique, c'est moi."*

A portly man in a dark suit and a red fez faced them like an expensive bowling pin.

"Prince Said," bubbled Ronnie, "so you're in on this venture too." She turned to Lucy. "Give me time to get His Highness situated. The bar is right around the corner. I'll be with you in a minute."

By the time the white-jacketed bartender produced a martini, Lucy was almost suffocating from billows of smoke and the nasal voice of Diana Ross. She glanced around. By an unlit fireplace Ronnie was introducing Prince Precious to a smiling blonde. If anything, the brunette decided, she was underdressed. Opening night at the opera seemed to be the occasion. The statuesque women swirling by could give any woman an inferiority complex. Most of Ronnie's female guests appeared to have come directly from modeling assignments for *Vogue*. Together they looked as though they had enough jewelry to restock Tiffanys.

The men made her feel like she had just walked into a meeting of the U.N. A few had turbans, some spoke broken English, and most were more formal than American men—all exuded wealth and power like a heavy cologne.

An overwhelming sense that she had spent too much time in the bargain basement swept over her. An Italian man with an uneven mustache said something to her. The words she didn't understand—the meaning was clear. Her first impulse was to slap his face. Instead she returned a look that said, "Not in your lifetime, buster!"

He persisted. His manner was as obnoxious as the Turkish cigarette he waved in front of her. Maybe it was time to cool him down with a spilt martini.

A strong hand appeared around her waist. She felt herself being led away. Not dragged, nearly carried. She looked up. He was tall and muscular, roughly the size of Michael, but not so rough-looking. A Club Med tan, a white dinner jacket, and a confident smile suggested breeding.

"Guido has a bad habit of being his vineyard's best customer, I'm afraid." He opened the French doors to the terrace. "Let's put something between us and the foul air."

His face wasn't ruggedly handsome like Michael's. He had a sophisticated, slightly older look. Gray showed above the ears, and the jaw set firmly below a soft smile. His eyes were unmistakable. Deep Mediter-

ranean blue, almost black, they stared down, inviting, holding, engulfing her.

In the background Diana Ross moaned about being "Swept Away."

The man, whom she guessed to be about 6′4″, led her through the doors and onto the plant-covered terrace. The warm Miami air enveloped them, its salt-sea scent so different from inside. She felt as though they had stepped onto a deserted tropical island. "This is better, no?" he said with a deep, soft voice that turned questions into declarations.

"Yes," she replied, knowing instantly that her "escape" may have been into the fire. She felt on edge, a bit unsecure the way her body was reacting to the stranger. Maybe she had lived on familiar ground too long. "I don't know which was more stiffling in there, the smoke or your friend Guido."

"Actually he is not a friend," said the man. "Merely an acquaintance with whom one must do business if one wishes to do business." He looked into her eyes. "I will have to remember to compliment Stella on her taste. She has outdone herself."

"Stella?" said Lucy, cocking her head.

"You are from the agency?"

"What agency?"

"My mistake," he smiled. "But in my defense, one easy to make. It is hard to believe that a woman of your beauty just wandered in off the street."

She felt momentarily insulted. "I assure you I was invited."

"You were?"

"By Ronnie."

"Ronnie? Oh, Veronique."

On the other side of smokey glass doors, couples mingled like something out of a 40's high society movie. "What kind of a party is this?" she said.

"Think of it as an ice-breaker. Tomorrow, when everyone has sobered up, we will get down to business."

"Which is?"

"Real estate. Stocks can drop, gold fluctuates, but the good earth endures."

"That sounds like a sales pitch to me, right out of the Yuppie Bible." It suddenly struck the brunette that during the entire conversation she had not been able to unlock her eyes from his gaze.

"Are you in a buying mood?"

"I don't think I could afford the price."

"You never know until you take the chance. Sometimes you give a little to get a lot."

Her mellow mood was suddenly interrupted. The French doors shuddered. She jumped, spilling the last drops of the martini. A dark man in a colorful dashiki was sprawled against the other side of the glass. A few feet in front of the man stood Guido, his jacket unbuttoned and a thin knife in his hand.

Lucy's rescuer was past her and through the doorway before she knew it. A crowd began to gather around the two combatants. The African screamed something she could not understand. Guido's blade sliced the air with a universal answer.

The man who an instant before had been talking with her now stood poised between the two antagonists. "Kutanna," he said to the African, "calm yourself down." He turned to the Italian. "Guido," he said, holding out his hand, "we need that knife to cut the Camembert."

Guido drew back, flashing the long blade. "I will not enter into any arrangement that includes this overtanned canoe-paddler."

"Guido," said the tall stranger, his eyes widening and his voice more definite, "the knife." The fingers on his already outstretched hand uncurled. "You did not come all the way from Florence to vacation in an American jail."

The black man jerked up a bottle from an ice bucket.

The tall man's voice sliced through the smoke and tension. "Kutanna, no more." A hand extended in the African's direction.

Lucy watched the two combatants hand over their weapons like supplicants bringing an offering to the altar.

"My friends," the stranger said to the crowd, his voice almost lilting, "the evening is young and the wine is old. Enjoy."

Ronnie appeared beside Lucy. "Well, roomie, what do you think of my Victor?"

WHAT WAS SHE THINKING ABOUT THE TALL, DECISIVE Victor? At that moment Lucy couldn't say. Mainly because she didn't know. The moment on the terrace and the angry confrontation had revealed two totally different sides of the man. Or had they?

Victor was a person who seemed in total control of every situation, which was more than she could say about herself. Why, Luce, has he so affected you? In her work she encountered a variety of men every day—some strong, some weak; some gentlemen, some bums; some aggressive, some suggestive. Victor was none of these, or maybe all of them.

Victor was unique, very attractive, and Ronnie's. "He's interesting," she heard herself saying. "You're lucky to have caught

him."

Sipping champagne, Ronnie said, "If by caught, you mean 'married'—we're not."

"Oh, I just assumed . . . "

"Lucifer, in what retreat have you been hiding?" She glanced at her other wrist." According to my Lucien Picard, it's the 1980's. Don't tell me you still subscribe to white gowns and little gold rings? That kind of thing is so declasse. Only my father still lives by that code." She looked around, then whispered in the brunette's ear. "Of course, if that Mike Shayne is anything like those articles describe, that would explain what you are doing."

A strong hand appeared on the naked shoulders of each woman, and Victor was standing between then. "My dear, I don't believe your charming friend is interested in a dissertation against traditional values."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Don't worry, darling. It wouldn't have come to blows."

He smiled widely. "Aren't you going to introduce me to this old friend of yours?" He gazed into Lucy's eyes. "Pardon. By 'old,' I meant only the duration of your relationship."

Ronnie's eyebrows arched. "What makes you think we're old friends?"

"We talked a bit earlier, and nobody in our crowd ever refers to you as 'Ronnie.' I don't know why. Frankly I think it's cute."

"Lucy, Victor Sabal. Victor, *mon chou,* Lucile Hamilton. Lucy to her friends. She and I roomed together a few years ago."

Victor took the brunette's hand and kissed it. *"Enchante."*

Lucy felt the warmth starting up her arm.

"Talk about your old-fashioned manners," said the dark-haired woman.

"Sometimes, Ronnie," said Lucy, "the old ways still have much to offer."

"Exactly," pronounced Victor. "My dear, since your friend seems to be enjoying our little soiree so much, why don't you invite her to go with us tomorrow afternoon."

"Thanks," said Lucy, "but I was lucky to be able to get away tonight. Michael and I are swamped."

"Michael?" said Victor.

"My boss," she said. What did the change in Victor's face mean? Relief?

"Too bad," said Ronnie. "Perhaps some other time."

"Nonsense," said the tall man. "Any good employer knows his em-

ployees work better if they are given some vacation time. Please come."

"I can't," said Lucy. "Really."

"Promise me you'll at least think about it," pressed Victor.

Lucy hesitated. "Well . . . O.K. I promise."

SHE STOOD FROZEN BEFORE THE FROSTED-GLASS DOOR marked MICHAEL SHAYNE, INVESTIGATIONS. Lucy rubbed her neck and squinted. Her whole body felt tired. After returning from Ronnie's she had been unable to fall asleep. Her mind had been like an expensive VCR, constantly replaying the evening's key moments in slow motion, freezing the high points. How long had it been since she had tasted caviar? When was the previous time she had worn the deep-veed gown? In her whole life how many men had she met like Victor?

The warm sea-scent she had inhaled on the terrace drifted through her senses. She felt momentarily high, then ashamed. Part of her was behaving like some Harlequin heroine. No, she told herself, it wasn't like that. Sure she was enraptured, but not with a man. With a lifestyle. Her days in Miami had settled into a comfortable blandness, no highs, no lows. Moments of time sanded and smoothed so you quickly forgot you were touching them. Twice-a-month paychecks, Lean Cuisine menus, and nothing acquired unless bought ON SALE. Life made sense from where she was camped—half-way between the peaks and valleys where the sky was partly cloudy all day.

She put her hand on the doorknob. Yes, it was the life she had chosen, and she had submerged herself in it. At rare moments, though, she had wanted more. She remembered a few months ago when she had talked Michael into letting her go out in the field to help the Canadian, LeChampion. She had nearly died from her lack of experience, but she recalled lying in the Boca Raton hospital, nearly comatose, telling herself that even if she died she was doing something meaningful. Michael had promised her that there would be more cases like that one, more chances, but of course there weren't. Something had scared him up in Boca, and though they had never talked about it, she had a good idea what it was.

When she was in the office, he didn't have to worry. When she was in the field, she wanted to be an addition to his life, but in reality she subtracted from his efficiency.

What was it the song lyrics said? "Everybody needs a little time away." No, that was foolish. She had a job to do, a commitment she had freely chosen. Then why did the doorknob in her hand suddenly feel so cold?

"Lucy, where in hell have you been?" Shayne roared.

She glanced at the old wall clock. 8:42. "Michael, the office doesn't officially open until 9:00. I'm here in plenty of time."

"Angel, you know how swamped we've been. I count on you to pick up the slack."

Perched on her desk, he was shaving off a heavy growth. The sleeves on his frayed white shirt were rolled up, and his faded tie was only at half-mast. "It's not my fault that you've become a celebrity. Perhaps now is the time to reconsider hiring someone."

"Out of the question. I've always been a one-man operation."

"And Florida's always had enough water to drink. But things change, Michael. Wells and people dry up."

"What are you trying to say?"

"You know Ransom would love to help you more often, and it would give him something to do other than single-handedly keeping a Kentucky distillery going."

"That seedy, old bum."

"Is the second-best private investigator in this town even if he is eligible for Medicare." She put her handbag in the bottom right drawer and removed the dust cover from the Apple IIe. "And even with this computer in here, I could use a little extra help. What about Miriam down at the MPD Community Relations? She'd love working for you. Perhaps only half-days at first."

"How long have just you and I held down the fort, Angel?"

"Maybe too long. We're under siege and don't even know it."

Shayne fired up a Camel. She began to cough instantly. "Michael, do you mind? I'm not feeling that terrific this morning."

"So you went to the party after all."

She didn't know how to take the comment. Was he being critical? Had she lost her bearings?

The redhead stubbed out the cigarette. "How come?"

"An old friend begged me."

"Old as in New Orleans?"

"Yes."

Another look she didn't understand covered his face. He started to say something to her, then changed his mind. She inserted Appleworks in the disk drive. A red light came on. "Is there something you want to say to me, Michael?"

"Well . . . skip it!" He put the Norelco down and pulled on his blue sports coat. "What's-his-name arrives from Boston at the airport in less than an hour. Just tell the clients to wait."

"Wait a minute," she said. "You knew this guy was coming in a

couple of days ago?"

"Yeah."

"Then why didn't you reschedule or cancel the appointments you had for this morning."

"I don't know," he said, pulling up his tie and letting down his composure. "I guess I expected you'd take care of it."

"I'm a secretary, Michael, not a mind reader. Hold it." She picked up the appointment calendar. "I see you've written a few names in on Friday."

"Yeah. They called last night after you left."

"Friday you're in court, remember?"

"Well, just reschedule them for next week."

"How? You didn't get their numbers."

"Angel, I'm not a secretary."

"You expect me to be more than a secretary." Her temper was slowly catching up to his. "Why shouldn't I expect you to be more than a private investigator?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Angel, this isn't like you."

"Maybe it's exactly like me. Maybe you don't know who I really am any more. Have I become just another frayed shirt in your life?" She was screaming now.

"Angel, I don't understand what's happening."

Simultaneously a knock sounded on the door and the phone rang. "Well, Michael, which are you going to answer?"

"What?" He didn't move.

"Make up your mind," she said, snatching her purse from her drawer. "Because I've made up mine."

"What are you talking about?"

She stepped past him.

"What's that?" he said.

"My decision." She pushed aside the guy from Hollywood who was standing in the door. "I quit."

VI

THE SLEEK PROW OF THE CABIN CRUISER KNIFED through the Intracoastal Waterway. Standing in the rear of the boat, Lucy felt the warm breeze against her skin. The hot sun seemed to revitalize her. Like a plant that had been dormant during the winter, she was opening up. How unlike the drudgery of the office day, the shrill ring of the phone, the scruffy clients with more complaints than cash,

the piling up of paper, baloney sandwiches snatched between typed reports.

It was even better than a vacation. These were stolen hours, unplanned moments when she was usually imprisoned in the Flagler Street office. But she couldn't totally enjoy her escape. As much as she tried to fight it, a sense of guilt crouched below her consciousness, every now and then popping to the surface like a mullet feeding. She had a job. Michael depended upon her. Maybe too much, but that was the way it had been for so long. That was just it—everything had been so long, so predictable, so dull.

On the bow of the boat Victor's guests mingled, sipping champagne and laughing at unheard jokes. Where did she belong? Both the Flagler Street office and the crowd pulled at her. Which way would she go? Which way did she really want to go?

From atop the craft Victor waved. She waved back. Standing near him, Ronnie saw the sign, and thinking it was meant for her, waved. What a strange man he was? And yet his silhouette against the sun reminded her so much of Michael. Men in control, men who had a firm grip on the steering wheel fascinated, attracted her. But where Michael was a rough gem with so many uncut edges, Victor was the polished stone.

What attracted her more? Victor or the life he led?

"Didn't I see you at the party last night?"

Lucy turned to the port side. A middle-aged man in a white linen suit and black-silk tie handed her a glass of champagne. "Why, yes?"

"Dom Perignon," he said. "Victor certainly has good taste." His eyes bored a hole into her chest.

She wished now she had worn a short-sleeve sweater instead of the cotton sundress. Would Victor have to save her from another international Romeo? She took the glass.

"My name is Rene Larousse, like the dictionary."

"What?"

"Larousse. It's a dictionary to translate French into English and vice-versa."

"Oh." She took a sip.

"And your name?"

"Lucy Hamilton."

"So you're not part of our little investment group."

"Oh, no," she said. "I can hardly afford to invest in gourmet TV dinners."

"You make a joke." He chuckled. "You must be part of Victor's entertainment."

"Entertainment?"

"If you noticed at the party last night, all the women were young and beautiful."

She nodded, remembering her own observations.

"None of us have our wives with us. It is well known that Victor always provides companions for his get-acquainted parties. I thought maybe he had extended the practice another day."

What he meant hit her like an icy spray of Arctic water. "You think . . . I assure you, Mr. Larousse, that I'm not here as a companion." She fought off an urge to push him off the back of the boat. But it wasn't his fault. What else was he to think? Here she was obviously unattached and other than Ronnie, the only woman on board.

She handed him back the champagne. "It's gone flat. If you'll excuse me."

She crossed the deck and climbed the ladder. A sudden breeze blew her dress upward. As she smoothed it back, she noticed all the men's eyes were on her.

Ronnie glanced up from the deck chair where she was sunning herself. "Well, is this the life?"

"How could you do this to me?" said the brunette.

"Do what?" said her friend. "I thought you were enjoying yourself."

"Last night it was Guido. Today it's a Frenchman."

"What do you mean?"

"They all think I'm some kind of party girl, here for their entertainment."

"Take the wheel, my dear," said Victor. "This whole situation is my fault."

He clasped Lucy's hands in his own and led her to the front of the upper deck. "Lucy, what was happening never occurred to me. Accept my apologies."

She was determined his eyes weren't going to change her mind. "Tell me, Victor," she said sternly, "is it standard business practice to provide high-class call girls to prospective clients."

He stared at her for a moment as if trying to come to a decision. "You're over-reacting, but I'm not going to lie to you. I admit the women last night were bought and paid for, but they were not what you Americans call hookers. They were simply escorts, young ladies provided like pate and fine wine to make a business climate more agreeable. And if I might add, to make my 'pitch' more attractive. I assure you that is as far as it goes."

"Well . . . "

"I will wager you did not see a single one of those women leave the party with any of my clients."

"No, I guess . . . just what is it you're selling?"

"I thought Veronique explained that to you."

"She said land."

"It's a little more than that. Sit down."

They sat on captain chairs across a laminated table. Victor pulled a chilled bottle from an ice bucket and poured two glasses. "Cheers," he said.

Lucy felt the cool liquid trickle down her throat and the warm breeze sift through her hair.

"For most of the twentieth century Europe has been embroiled in one war after another. The economy, even with the Common Market, is not very stable. Now with high inflation rates and a tenuous political atmosphere of nuclear uncertainty, Europeans are even more concerned with their investments. The Arabs and Japanese are particularly fond of your corn belt land. Europeans, on the other hand, favor the Sunbelt. Agriculture is risky, but tourism is a sure thing."

"So you're into helping Europeans find solid investments in the South."

"Helping. I like that. Yes, that's exactly what I'm into. Just last year I helped a couple from Dusseldorf purchase a shopping center outside Ocala. I heard from Hans just last week in Paris. He sold it for a three-hundred per cent profit. Between you and me, that's the problem with Germans. They are more interested in turning a quick profit than a long-term investment. But I am an arranger, not a judge."

"It's fascinating," she admitted, feeling her irritation drift away with the warm breeze.

Overhead a drawbridge raised to let them pass.

He looked over the top of his glass at her. "I am just as fascinated with the natural beauties this part of your country has to offer."

Why was it, she wondered, that she never knew quite what he meant.

The cabin cruiser began to slow down.

"Voila," he said, pointing at a wharf on which sat two jeeps with striped canopies. "Point Pleasure, a new retirement community."

Just past the wharf newly paved roads wound through staked-off plots of half-cleared land.

"I confess," he said, "my project is just in the embryo stage, but when we get to the recreation center, I'll show you the plans."

"Thanks, but I'm not ready to retire yet."

"That's not what I had in mind."

"What do you have in mind, Victor?"

He smiled through gleaming teeth. "If you are tired of your Michael, I would like you to come to work with me."

VII

BEFORE SHE COULD ANSWER, RONNIE INTERRUPTED. "IF I could break up this *tete-a-tete* a minute, Mr. Shoup just called on the ship-to-shore. He needs to see you immediately on docking, Victor."

The tall man turned to Lucy. "You'll have to excuse me. My developer is a bit of a worry-wart. He's never happy until every nail is specified, every grain of sand inventoried." He stood up and smiled down with his eyes. "Think about my offer, Miss Hamilton."

She smiled back.

As Victor disappeared down to the lower deck to be the first off the docking craft, Ronnie sat down in his chair. She took out a cigarette and stuck it in the silver filter. "If we weren't such good friends, Lucifer, I'd be jealous."

"You asked me to get to know him."

"Not that close."

"Believe me, Ronnie, my interest in Victor is professional." As she said it, the brunette wondered how true it was. Sure, it had begun that way, but now? She was certain, though, Ronnie was right about one thing—Victor's eyes were magnetic, the kind that burned into her soul. Why was it that when she was around him she felt so vulnerable? He had the power to know what was going on inside her just by looking at her.

"What kind of an offer did he make you?"

"I'm not sure. He wants me to work for him."

"Well, it's too bad you're unavailable. If you weren't employed by that detective, you could really get close to Victor's business, find out what's going on."

Lucy's face revealed her puzzlement.

"I'm sort of like those party girls when it comes to his business," Ronnie confessed. "Window dressing. He won't let me into that part of his life."

Lucy knew what she meant. Wasn't that one of the very things she and Michael had been arguing about for the past year? Men were just so protective about their jobs. Women were always welcome in their beds, sometimes in their offices, but never really in their lives. "As a matter of fact," the brunette announced, "I *am* available."

"You are? But that detective you've been working for so long? I mean, you followed him all the way here from New Orleans. If it's not

prying, what happened?"

Lucy said, "I'm not sure. It's been building up for quite a while now. What I do know is I need a change of pace, to get away."

"You don't think it's going to be permanent, do you?"

"I don't know."

"When I came to you and asked you to help me with Victor, I certainly didn't want to sever your relationship with . . . "

"Michael Shayne."

"Yes."

"You had nothing to do with it."

Ronnie stood up. "Come on, we've got to catch up to the tour. Say what you will, Lucifer, I feel responsible for what's happened between you and him, and I promise you I won't rest until you two are back together."

MOST OF THE GROUP SAT AROUND A HIGH-CEILINGED recreation room, the only building completed. Charts, pictures, and architectural drawings of the future development surrounded them. Victor had gone to talk to his developer, and Ronnie was busy arranging things with the caterer. In the distance Lucy smelled the brunch. Eggs, smoked salmon, and hot pastry tantalized her empty stomach.

A white-haired man with a prospectus in hand sat down at the redwood table across from her. With a tweed coat and riding crop in hand, he looked more ready to ride to the hounds than to survey the reclaimed land in South Florida.

"I understand," he said, "that you are a friend of our host."

"Yes," she said, hoping the long line of Lotharios had petered out.

"Perhaps you could fill me in on this chap Sabal's background. Not that I'm questioning him, mind you, it's just that I have a lot riding on this investment. The British pound is going the way of the empire. I just sold my plant in Manchester, and I don't wish to be caught with—what is your expression—a pig in the poke."

The brunette brushed the hair from in front of her face. "I wish I could help you, but I don't know much about Victor myself. You see, I'm really just a friend of Veronique, along for the ride, you might say."

"Oh, perhaps, then, you can tell me something about Florida land development. I read a piece in *The Times* about the depleting water supply. Less rainfall, land drying up and causing those dreadful sinkholes, sewage problems, and all that rot."

"I'm sorry, Mr. . . . "

"Kensington, Mark Kensington."

"Mr. Kensington, I'm afraid you're out of my league."

The Englishman slowly rose and departed without another word. The brunette was overwhelmed with a sense of her own ignorance. She had lived in her little corner of the world so long. Oh, she knew standard contracts, the QWERTY keyboard, basic courtroom procedure, but that was hardly a grain of sand on the beach. She had been sheltered by the sameness of her existence. Maybe quitting Michael was the best thing she could have done if she wanted to grow as a person.

A white-jacketed Hispanic began to pass out glass plates with double P's in the middle. Lucy picked up hers and headed for the buffet table. Sculptured fruit, champagne from a fountain, seafood in open shells, platters of neatly sliced meat.

Ronnie joined her in line. "The trouble I had getting this ready you don't want to hear about."

Lucy had just speared a succulent boiled shrimp when the door to the recreation building burst open. "Come quick," yelled a man the brunette recognized as Rene Larousse. "There's been an accident."

The group followed him down to the dock. One of the boat hands was helping Victor drag something from the water. They set it down on the wooden planks.

"He's dead," Victor announced.

Lucy stifled a gasp. It was the first man she had met at the party last night.

Guido.

VIII

LUCY HAMILTON STARED AT THE SUN UNTIL SHE thought she was blind. It couldn't be happening. A mere moment ago she had been standing in paradise, and now? "There is no Santa Claus." "See those wires, honey. Peter Pan can't really fly." The original Trigger was stuffed in a museum. That bright, gleaming apple was wax.

In an instant she knew what had been happening to her. Escape pure and simple. Over the years she had built up a dissatisfaction, a resentment toward her secretarial lifestyle. Each day was just another brick in the wall between reality and what her youthful expectations had been. Part of her had never been willing to accept the inevitability of compromise.

But Guido was dead. Really dead. Some unseen director wouldn't suddenly yell "Cut" so that the stunt man lying there could rise up and peel off a pasty-white mask.

Dead. What was the sound made by dreams collapsing?

When Ronnie had suddenly appeared, Lucy had no doubt she had glamorized her old friend. How typically romantic! The desperate summons to adventure. Prince Victor stood there dripping wet, gasping for air, his wet hair revealing a bald spot at the back of his head, his chest heaving so that the slight roll around his waist rippled through the tight-fitting, custom-tailored, monogrammed shirt. Even the European aristocrats stood around nervously as though their Rolex Oysters had all struck midnight at once.

"I couldn't find Shoup," Victor was explaining between heaves. "On my way back I heard a splash. Tico here helped me pull poor Guido up. We couldn't save him."

Larousse examined the body. Like Basil Rathbone searching for clues, Lucy decided. Ronnie glanced down at her Prince Charming, then grabbed her stomach.

Lucy helped her up. Ronnie got sick on her sundress. Eden went from faded Technicolor to fuzzy black-and-white for the brunette.

Ronnie stumbled. Lucy caught her. A sound barely above a whisper escaped her friend's lips. "I need your help more than ever, Lucifer."

"Why?"

"I know Victor killed Guido."

LUCY PRESSED THE BUTTON FOR THE SELF-SERVICE elevator. The pitted metal doors moved together as if jaws in slow motion. Basement machinery whined and groaned, and suddenly the elevator lurched upward. She was surrounded by pornographic graffiti, stickers, and enough deviant offers complete with telephone numbers to keep a pervert busy for a year.

Her body felt hot and sweaty. She had spent the better part of the afternoon watching the sun set and a police officer pick his nose while asking questions about Guido's death. Since nobody had seen the Italian fall in the Intracoastal, and there were no immediate suggestions of "foul play," the young cop concluded, "It must be an accident."

The reaction of the aristocrats disgusted her. They sat there answering questions, complaining of the heat, and deriding the policeman for doing his job. Their only concern was how long they would be detained before they could get back to their wine and cheese.

The death of a man they had all known troubled them even less than being served champagne at room temperature.

None of them had even wanted to mention that the man Victor called Kutanna had quarreled with Guido the night before. And when she had brought that unpleasant fact to the cop's notice, she half-expected them like Roman patricians to turn thumbs down and let the lions feed.

It was with great relief when the cop closed his notepad, told them he'd keep them informed of the Medical Examiner's report, and Victor ferried them back to the cabin cruiser's Miami slip.

With a noisy jolt the elevator came to a halt, but the doors didn't open. Fine! Just what she needed. Maybe fate was telling her she shouldn't have come here in the first place. She knew that, but she had swallowed more pride than Guido had water.

No matter which way she turned, no matter how much she hated it, all roads led to a seedy hotel-apartment on the banks of the beautiful, garbage-strewn Miami River.

Because Michael lived here.

She had called the office. Finally he had stopped haunting it, for no one answered. Maybe he was out running around with that P.I. from Boston, but then again he might be home.

Ronnie had asked for her help, but murder was out of her league. She had walked out on Michael this morning, but she now knew it wasn't so much him as her disillusionment with a lifestyle, a way of living that was somehow epitomized by her being trapped in a faulty elevator in a run-down hotel.

Was it second thoughts about what she had said and done or the reality of the situation? Whatever, she knew she needed to talk to her red-haired ex-boss.

Like a shark that realizes it has swallowed more than it can chew, the elevator's doors suddenly popped open. She didn't waste any time exiting. She walked down the threadbare carpet through a gauntlet of cracked plaster and stained wallpaper. The smell of mildew flooded her nostrils. She knocked on the door.

Almost instantly it opened. He was standing there, his hand on the doorknob. Sweat stains ringed the arms of his Dolphins' sweatshirt.

"Been working out," she said as she walked in.

He nodded and shut the door.

His living room looked like civilization had bypassed it. His laundry basket was the floor, newspaper littered every flat surface, glasses and plates with unfinished food provided spawning grounds for bacteria. The Grand Hotel it was not.

"I've been busy," he said lying back on a weight bench. He grasped the barbell overhead and began his repetitions.

"How was Sp . . . "

"The bastard never showed. Maybe he got snowed in or maybe he hired a finder of lost loves. I don't know."

"Oh."

"Have a drink if you want. It's on the coffee table."

A jelly glass sat on either side of a nearly empty bottle of Martell. "Why," she said, "do I get this feeling I was expected?"

His only answer was the loud exhalation through clenched teeth.

"I got to thinking about this morning," she said. "I didn't really mean to walk out in a huff."

"What did you mean to do?"

"Right now I'm not sure. You were so busy and this friend of mine really needed me and everything suddenly got so intense."

The redhead kept pumping the weights rhythmically, the perspiration covering his reddening face.

"And now I don't know what to do. Ronnie claims her husband is a murderer."

Without slacking his rhythm Shayne said, "Is Ronnie the old friend from New Orleans?"

"Yes. For a short time before you and I met, I roomed with her. Her mother died when she was young. Her father had kicked her out of the house. She never would say why."

"And the Lucy Hamilton Home for Strays took her in."

The sarcasm in his voice cut her, but she tried not to bleed. "Something like that. Anyway, the other day she just showed up here in Miami scared to death that this man she's close to is an international assassin."

"And you thought that good old Mike could surely squeeze in one more little case. Just to help an old friend."

"No, it's not like that at all. I didn't come to you. In fact, I didn't say anything to you because I knew you were so busy."

"But now you've changed your mind?"

"Sort of. No, I don't want you to take her on as a full-fledged client, but, yes, as a favor to me, I'd like to be able to talk the situation over with you."

"Don't tell me you're thinking about investigating this on your own? Didn't the LeChampion case teach you anything?"

"Yes, but not what you think."

"Well, you don't need me. For fifty bucks you can get a license and open up the Lucile Hamilton Agency."

"That's not funny, Michael. I came over here to get a little advice, not to be cut up by your sarcastic tongue. I should have known better with the mood you've been in lately. If you want to lift some real weight, Michael, why don't you start with that oversized head of yours."

His muscles straining, his breathing labored, the redhead continued to hoist the weight.

She stood up. "Don't worry. I'll figure out some way to help Veronique myself."

"Veronique?" He slowed down.

"Yes. Veronique Dessaints."

Abruptly he returned the weight to the stand.

She watched as his face took on a deeper shade of red. "You came for advice. I'll give you some—with no strings attached." Through gritted teeth, he spat out, "Stay away from that woman. She's poison."

His remark caught her off guard. "Why do you say that? Do you know something about her?"

"That's none of your business, none of your damned business."

IX

THE AGGRESSION WELLED UP INSIDE THE BRUNETTE. "What do you mean, none of my business?"

The redhead picked up a Turkish towel and rubbed his stubbled face. "Look, I've never pressed you about your life before we met. I don't think you should push me."

"I can't believe it. You actually knew Ronnie before and never said anything?"

"I hung out with a guy named Mule Mason when I worked the oil rigs off Galveston, but I never told you about him either."

"That's different."

"Why?"

"Because Ronnie's a friend of mine."

"I didn't know that until just now."

"What do you know about her? You said she was poison."

"Just take my word for it."

"Why should I?"

"You have before."

The sweat and the frustration were closing in, smothering her. Maybe one last shot. "You mean you know something about my good friend and you're not going to tell me?"

"That's right."

The situation was past the point of reason. She headed for the door. Something made her stop. "How'd the talk show go?"

"What talk show?"

"The luncheon?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there."

Knowing she had contributed something was a small compensation. "Don't forget that drug trial tomorrow. Ragland says that without

your testimony, Givan walks."

"Thank you, Mother Hen. Would you like to tuck me in before you leave?"

All of her doubts were gone. "Well, at least I know I made the right decision this morning."

She didn't give him the satisfaction of slamming the door.

THE WIND OFF BISCAYNE BAY WAS STARTING TO CLEAR her head when she walked into her apartment building. Her relationship with Michael had reached low tide. Sure, they had had their tiffs and spats in the past. There had even been times when she had wanted to wring his neck and stuff him in the oven, but he had never been this distant, this callous. One thing they had always been able to do was talk over their problems. During the past year when she had tried to verbalize her frustrations with the job, her life, their relationship, he had been willing to listen, even to help.

But not now. Something had changed.

She entered the staircase. She needed the exercise. In that, Michael had the right way of working out frustrations. Was she, she wondered, seeing a side of him she had never known? Had Michael been going through some sort of change and she, preoccupied with her own problems, missed it?

As she reached the second landing, she heard a whimpering. At the end of the hall, half in the darkness, crouched a figure. Moving closer, Lucy recognized the woman lying in the corner like a stray seeking shelter.

"Ronnie," she said. "What are you doing here? What's happened?" She extended her hands and pulled her friend up.

"Please help me. I can't stay with him any longer."

Lucy understood. One look at her friend's bruised cheeks and puffed-up eye was all it took.

RONNIE CRADLED THE CERAMIC MUG OF COFFEE. "YOU still make a good cup, roomie. You know me, the old water-burner herself. It's a good thing I've had servants to do my cooking for me or I'd have starved."

"You always did underestimate yourself."

Her friend pulled the chenille bathrobe around her. "Does this remind you of the Bourbon Street flat?"

"Yes. Like the night you first showed up at my door."

"Because father dear had just thrown me onto the street."

Lucy gazed across the kitchen table. "You never did tell me what

happened that night."

"It's not important, but after Mother died, it was all downhill."

"You never wanted to talk about that either."

"The boating accident." She curled up like a child being read a story. "Mother was skiing on the lake and fell. My father was driving the boat. I was just a little girl, but they had strapped me to a fishing chair in the back so I couldn't get hurt. I watched my mother fall and just lie there. I yelled to my father, but he couldn't hear me, I guess. When it was over, he just shook me and screamed why didn't I let him know. I guess it was easier to blame me than himself."

"He abused you like that?"

"Yes, but in the whole rest of our life together he never once got emotional again. Even when he physically removed me from our house, it was totally without feeling."

Lucy hugged her friend. Why was it some people became victims for life, just being passed on from one misfortune to another? Ronnie seemed to be a magnet for tragedy.

"I don't want to talk about Victor any more," the dark-haired woman announced meekly.

"O.K., honey." Lucy stared through the window at Miami. Mostly darkness broken by an occasional light.

"He had never hit me before," said Ronnie.

"I understand."

"But he gets tense periodically. It's like one of those old Lon Chaney movies. You know, when the moon is full, even a man pure-of-heart changes. The last time it happened we were in Paris. The night before we left. Riding the Metro. For no reason he suddenly starts cursing. Like a one-man X-rated movie. The people sitting around us thought he was crazy." She began to cry.

"Easy, girl."

"Maybe that's why Victor and I were attracted to each other in the first place. He fights his demons and I mine."

Lucy felt almost like she ought to start singing a lullaby.

"You know, something, Lucifer. It's hell loving somebody and thinking at the same time you might be better off apart from him."

"Amen," chorused the brunette unconsciously.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up your relationship with Michael Shayne."

Lucy sat straight up. As long as they were being honest with each other. "Just before I came back here, he and I had something that was about halfway between a discussion and a brawl. He had a strange comment."

"Oh?"

"That he knew you before."

"Me? I doubt it. This is my first time in Miami."

"Like the two of us, Michael used to live in New Orleans. Do you remember him from there?"

"No, I can't say I do. Was he a detective there, too?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm. There was this man once . . . no, it couldn't be."

"What are you talking about?"

"Before my father kicked me out of the family manor, when I was a bit younger, I ran away. Went up the river to St. Louis and got a job as a hostess. Well, Daddy Dearest felt guilty or something and hired this detective to find me and bring me home."

"Michael?"

"I don't remember. Those were my acid-dropping days. King Kong could have taken me down to the delta on a paddle-wheeler and all I might have noticed was his chest was a little hairy." Gradually she uncurled. "Got any more of this coffee? For some reason it reminds me of home."

Lucy took her cup and walked over the stove. She was pouring some of her special Louisiana brew when the phone rang. She put down the cup.

"Don't answer it?" said her friend. "It's probably Victor, and I don't want you to have to lie for me."

"It might be somebody else."

The phone kept ringing. Lucy hesitated, then started for it. Ronnie jumped up in front of her. "Don't. I know it's Victor and I'm so afraid. Wait, I know. I can prove what I've been telling you."

The phone kept trying as the dark-haired woman rummaged through her purse. Finally she found a piece of paper and handed it to Lucy.

"What's this?" said the brunette, looking at the handwritten yellow sheet that contained some cities and dates. "Brussels, 2 June."

"That's our itinerary. On each of those dates in each of those places, while we were there, somebody was slain."

"Are you sure?" said Lucy over the persistent telephone.

"Positive, and on the day before each one Victor had one of his fits of temper. You've got to help me. If I'm right, this means somebody in Miami dies tomorrow."

The phone was suddenly silent.

X

POSSIBILITY HAD REPLACED DOUBT IN LUCY'S MIND AS

she entered the tall, downtown building that housed the *Miami Daily News*. As soon as the phone had stopped ringing the previous night, she had packed a bag and checked them into the Riviera Towers, a small hotel several blocks from her apartment. They had walked, and she had made certain by cutting through two parking garages that they weren't followed. If Ronnie had been telling the truth—which seemed more likely every moment—she might be in grave danger. There was no sense in taking unneeded chances.

Morning had found Ronnie much calmer. Most of the night they had sat cross-legged on their beds making chit-chat and coffee on the hotel's Instabrew. Earlier that morning, after grabbing a catnap, she had forced Ronnie to promise to stay put.

"No problem," had yawned her friend. "In my condition I could sleep the whole day. Where are you going?"

"To do a little checking," she had answered, stuffing the yellow sheet in her purse.

Whenever Michael had a problem and needed information fast, he always seemed to turn to the human computer, Tim Rourke, his friend and columnist for the *Daily News*. The elevator deposited her at the City Room. In less than a minute she found the scarecrow Irishman sitting hypnotized in front of his VDT.

"Hello, Tim," she said.

The reporter sat back and raised his eyebrows as if in shock. "And to what do we owe the honor of your presence, Ms. Hamilton? Wait a minute. You don't mean that the tightwad shamus sent you to pay off that SuperBowl bet? Can you believe that Dolphinophile gave me San Fran and six?"

"Sorry, Tim."

"I know then. You've come to thank me personally for the superb job I'm doing on the Mike Shayne series. All that free publicity. I'm afraid my journalistic ethics won't allow me to accept an agent's fee, though. On the other hand, dinner and drinks at The Golden Cock fall within the Tim Rourke Ethical Guidelines."

She chuckled to herself as she pulled up a desk chair beside him. The stench of tobacco and the constant click of computer keyboards drifted into her senses. "As a matter of fact, I've come to you for help."

"Like boss, like employee. I see some of the rapidly-getting-famous Shayne investigative technique has rubbed off. Thinking about starting your own agency?"

"That's not funny," she said sternly.

"Lighten up, Lucy. I was just making a joke. It's one of the ways Mike and I relate." He leaned forward. "Is it my overactive Irish intui-

tion, or is there something wrong between you and . . . "

"I don't want to talk about that. Not now anyway." She withdrew the yellow sheet from her ox-blood Aigner and handed it to the lanky reporter.

"What's this? A shopping list?" he said, before looking at it. "You going on a trip? Lisbon, Munich, Grenoble. Hold it, what are these dates?"

"Days on which I think somebody was killed in those places. That's what I need your help on. Is there any way I can run a check?"

"Hey, what else is this humble reporter and his trusty computer for?" said Rourke ironically. "Dear Tim's job is simply to sit here and wait for Joe Citizen to stop in with personal problems."

"What's wrong?" she said, sitting back in her chair.

"Hey, the Action-Line desk is on the next floor."

"You do this kind of thing for Michael all the time."

"But *this* isn't for the shamus."

"It's the same thing."

"No, it's not."

"Why not? You and I are friends too, aren't we?"

"Certainly, but what you're asking me to do is personal, not professional."

"I don't see that distinction."

"That's the point. Sure, I do lots of things for Mike, but he always balances the ledger. I give him some information and he gives me a story—he's a source. Otherwise I'd be using the paper's resources to help a friend, and I can't do that. Listen, I may joke about my professional ethics, but the 30 is I got 'em."

"I'm not denying that, Tim."

"The purpose of these columns I've been doing on him lately isn't to drum up business for him—that's a fortunate byproduct. The articles are in the public interst, and if the shamus is such a character that he sells a few more papers, then in his words 'so be it'."

Lucy sucked in her lower lip. "If what I'm asking you leads to a story, I promise you first rights. Does that soothe your journalistic ethics?"

"Maybe. First, what makes you believe this information could lead to a story?"

"Because if I'm right, one man is responsible for all the deaths, and he's right here in Miami at this very moment."

Rourke swung around to his VDT. His fingers flew to the keyboard. "Let's check the morgue for some international editions. I'll try the day after each of these dates. Let's see, the first is a year ago. Puerto

Vallarta, Mexico." He punched a couple of keys. "Carlos Lepe, Minister of Tourism, was found in the Rio Cuale . . . bodysurfing with a hole in his forehead. Let me try the next day. Rurales baffled . . . no leads."

"What about the next listing?" said the brunette.

Rourke's fingers punched a few more keys. The screen filled with numbers and letters. "Kyoto . . . notorious crime figure slain at sports club . . . found in sauna with a bullet in the head." He punched again. "Police suspect he was the Yakuza."

"What's that?"

"Japanese for the Godfather. Not bad. Two for two, Lucy-san."

So Ronnie had been right about the killings, she thought. But about Victor?"

"Let me check another," said Rourke, his body and speech speeding up as he sensed blood. "Grenoble . . . bank executive . . . found in a hotel suite with a mistress in his arms and a slug in his brain." He continued to tap his requests into the keyboard. "Again, no solid leads."

Lucy watched the screen as if mesmerized as the reporter retrieved one crime story after another. All had a single common denominator—a bullet through the forehead. An execution.

"Huh, this is interesting," said the columnist. "The LaCherite death brought Interpol into the banking biz. I'm going to stay with this one a while." He grinned and punched. "Surete—that's the French FBI—concluded a week later LaCherite's death had all the earmarks of a professional hitman who authorities had suspected responsible for killings all over the globe . . . a shadowy figure without a face or a name other than Mamba."

"Mamba?"

Rourke sat back and looked at the brunette. "Yeah, I've run across that *nom du querre* in the past. Mamba's the heir apparent to Carlos."

"Wasn't he the international assassin?"

"Yeah, and if the authorities are right, Mamba isn't as well known yet, but like the snake from which he gets his name, he's just as deadly."

While Rourke searched the other dates, he talked to Lucy. "Hey, Angel, I apologize. It looks like you've put me on to one hell of a big story. Tell me, how did a honey-voiced Southern girl like you get connected with the big bad wolf?"

"An old friend of mine is travelling with a guy who deals in real estate for the Continental jet set. She's been afraid that he's had something to do with the killings."

"Was he in all these places?"

"On all these dates, at least according to my friend. That's who I got the list from."

Rourke stood up. "Wait a minute. You just said real estate. That LaCharite wipeout involved Interpol. That rings a bell. "Carl," he called across the room to his editor, "didn't we just send out a story over AP about a death yesterday at one of those retirement communities?"

"Yeah, supposedly an accidental drowning," came the answer.

"What page?"

Dirksen held up three fingers.

Rourke pulled the paper off a desk beside his and turned to page three. "Here it is."

"Point Pleasure?" said Lucy.

"You a mind reader? How did you know?"

"I was there. I saw them try to save poor Guido."

"Here's something I bet you didn't know."

"What's that?"

Rourke lowered the paper. "According to the FBI, Guido Panzini was an agent for Interpol."

XI

AT 1:38 LUCY UNLOCKED THE DOOR TO ROOM 124. HER eyes adjusting slowly to the darkness, she set her purse as well as the red and white bucket of chicken on the Formica-covered table. Kicking off her low-heeled Hush Puppies, she tiptoed toward Ronnie's bed. Her friend must have been serious about sleeping all day.

The bed was empty.

"Ronnie," she called, ripping the covers back in what she knew was a fruitless gesture.

No answer.

As though part of some strange game of hide 'n seek, she hurried to the bathroom.

Empty.

Where could Ronnie be? Had Victor done the impossible and found her? Maybe not so impossible. After all, how long would it take a pro with lots of money and connections to flush out an amateur trying to hide? Wasn't Victor a man who had been able to outsmart the Japanese mafia, Interpol, and the Surete?

What would Michael do now? The thought was automatic, a habit formed over the years. Self-reliance gave way to expediency. She picked up the phone on the nightstand.

"Hello, this is 124. I want to make a local call to . . . Change that."

No, by damn, Michael had made it clear she was on her own. "Have you been on the desk all day?"

"Yes."

"Did you see anyone come or go from this room?"

"Let's see," slurred the clerk. "A well-built brunette in gray slacks and a cranberry sweater just came in."

"That's me. What about any other movement?"

"A black-haired fox in green left maybe two hours ago."

"Was she alone?"

"Yep."

"Did she get any calls or visitors before she left?"

"Hey, lady, what is this, Twenty Questions or something?"

"Never mind. I'm sorry I troubled you."

Lucy hung up the phone. She put her shoes back on, then took them off. She needed to think this out. She sat down on her unmade bed. Had Ronnie gone back to the suite at the Grand Hotel? Boy, it felt warm, Why would she? The brunette smoothed out the pillow. Did her friend have that victim mentality that so many magazines were describing? Lucy lay back against the soft pillow. Things had been so tense lately and she had gotten so little sleep. That irrational need for abuse, the feeling that something was wrong in the absence of that abuse?

Images of Ronnie, the redhead, Point Pleasure, Tim Rourke began to carousel around her. The alluring aroma of Southern-fried chicken. She was losing her center of gravity, beginning to drift downward. How inviting the darkness seemed, like a fluffy, black pillow . . .

FOOTSTEPS SOUNDED OUTSIDE THE ROOM.

Lucy sat straight up and checked her watch. Nearly six. She had been sleeping almost four hours.

A key entered the lock.

The brunette reached for her purse and fumbled around inside. Her fingers grasped the small can of MACE Michael had given her.

The door inched open.

She brought the can up in front of her and tensed her finger.

Standing in the glare was Ronnie.

"Where have you been?" said the brunette.

Ronnie sat down slowly on the double-bed across from her. "I was going out of my mind, Lucifer. After you left, I tried to sleep, but every time a pipe clanked, the heat came on, or somebody flushed a toilet, I jumped out of my skin. I'm scared, more afraid than I've ever been."

Lucy took her friend's hands in her own. They seemed cold and clammy. "I think we should do now what we should have done to start

with."

"What's that?"

"Go to the police."

Ronnie ooohhhed and fell back on the bed. "Don't you think I've thought of that a thousand times?"

"Well?"

"What are we going to tell them? Look how long it took me to convince you of what I believed—and you're my friend. Can't you see the police now when two women show up and say they know this man is a paid killer." Ronnie's voice deepened as she mimicked a cop. "Hey, honey, if I were you, I'd quit going to Dirty Harry movies . . . Would you like me to go home with you and keep you safe, if you know what I mean? . . . " She winked suggestively.

In spite of herself Lucy laughed. "I see what you mean, but they're not all like that."

"Even the most sympathetic cop would tell us that there was nothing he could do until a definite crime was committed."

"But there have been twelve murders."

"Yes, but we can't show any real connection to Victor."

"I don't know about that. This reporter I know helped me dig up some interesting details."

"Oh." Ronnie sat up again. "What did you find out?"

"Just that you were right about Victor. Sure enough, if the list you gave me is accurate, you two were in a slew of cities when someone important was killed. And what's more, each of the victims was killed the same way."

"What's your reporter friend going to do with this information?"

"I'm not sure, but he told me to check the morning issue of the *Daily News* tomorrow. By the way, I also found out something about Guido, you know, the Italian Romeo . . . "

"All too well," Ronnie finished, shaking her head.

"Well, it turns out he was an agent with Interpol."

"What's that?"

"I'm sorry," said Lucy. "I should have known you wouldn't be up on something like that. Interpol is a European police force that operates across national boundaries."

"Do you think they were suspicious of Victor, too?"

"Could be. I don't think that Guido's death was an accident, and Victor was right there when he drowned."

Ronnie ran her fingers through her hair, drawing it back from her face. "I know all this should make me feel better, but now I'm more afraid than ever." She brought her palms together as if praying. "Luci-

fer, I know this is a big request, and I know you don't want to do it, but it could help us both."

"What?"

"Call your boss."

"Michael?"

"Yes. With him here we'd . . . well . . . we'd be safer. I mean it would just be this one night. When that newspaper comes out in the morning, Victor will know the authorities are on to him, and he'll leave immediately—like he always does."

"I can't just call Michael," said Lucy.

Ronnie jumped up and placed her hands on the brunette's shoulders.

Lucy jerked back involuntarily. The fingernails had cut right through the sweater and into her flesh. "That hurt, Ronnie."

"I'm sorry," said her friend, stepping back. "It's just that I'm at wit's end."

"I really can't."

"Can't or don't want to? Are you afraid to see him?"

"No."

"Pride?"

"No . . . maybe . . . well." In the back of her hand a little voice said, *"Are you afraid Michael might get hurt—again—and you'd be responsible?"*

"Call him—please."

The brunette did not want to sort through the tangled complex of emotions. Besides, reason told her what she should do.

Lucy picked up the phone.

RONNIE CAME OUT OF THE BATHROOM. IN HER JEANS AND sweatshirt as well as a bandana around her hair, the dark-haired woman looked less sophisticated, more like the Bourbon Street roommate, more vulnerable.

Ronnie turned out the desk light, the only one in the room.

"Why'd you do that?" said the brunette.

"Because we're now more difficult targets. Come on and help me."

The darkhaired woman started to move the bed.

"What are you doing?" said Lucy.

"While we wait for your boss to show, our backs are against the wall in more ways than one. Victor could arrive here before Michael, so we're going to be ready."

Ronnie stood up the bed on its side, then pulled Lucy behind it. "Sit down here."

"I still don't understand."

"I'm not going to end up with a bullet in the forehead like the rest of Victor's victims." Ronnie grabbed her purse.

They sat cross-legged in the dark with their backs pressed against the cold hotel wall.

"Remind you of a campfire?" Ronnie's voice was trembling.

"Sort of," said Lucy nervously. She wished Michael would hurry. Well, she had wanted to see what she could do on her own. It had been ten minutes since she had hung up. If she knew the big redhead, he'd be here any second. Pull yourself together, girl. Try to keep Ronnie calm. Just a little longer. Her eyes becoming adjusted to the dark, she turned to her friend. Ronnie sat there, her hands shaking as she cradled her purse.

From the hallway came footsteps.

"It's Victor," announced Ronnie.

"It could be anybody."

"I know Victor. He's come to get me."

The footsteps died in front of their door.

"Oh my God," exclaimed Ronnie. "No."

"Easy," said Lucy.

In the dim light the brunette saw Ronnie's hands slide into the purse. When they emerged, an automatic pistol was in them.

"Where did you get that?" said the brunette.

"It's Victor's. I took it from our room."

The doorknob jiggled.

The pistol pointed at the noise.

"No," Lucy said at the same time somebody said something from the doorway. Ronnie could be making a huge mistake.

The door opened.

"You're not getting me, Victor," screamed Ronnie.

Taking a quick glance at the shadow in the entrance, Lucy said, "Michael?"

The gun exploded in the brunette's ear.

Then again.

The entering figure toppled to the carpet.

Lucy scrambled across the mattress to the prostrate body. She put her hand on the carotid artery. "Oh no," she exclaimed, slumping to the floor. "He's . . . he's dead."

"What's wrong?" said Ronnie. "You sound like I shot the wrong man." ●

NEXT MONTH Lucy Hamilton returns in another thrilling adventure! DON'T MISS IT!

A sharp-edged credit card had the door open in seconds. As it swung aside, the odor of a dead body assailed my nostrils. I kicked the door shut behind me, reminding myself that I only played a role and somebody else wrote the script!

Missing

by DICK STODGHILL

I WATCHED THE EXCHANGE FROM THE CORNER OF MY eye. I wasn't interested, just a little amused. The two men in three-piece suits were so intent on being secretive they had attracted my attention.

No one else in the river-front diner knew anything was going on. An old woman with matted hair and gnarled features hovered over a plate of donuts, fearful someone might snatch one away. At the far end of the counter a man wearing jeans and a dirty T-shirt was lost in the sports section of the Louisville Times' Indiana edition. The waitress, a teenager with too many pounds and a mottled complexion, was more interested in a phone conversation than her customers.

The first man was tall with rounded shoulders under a mane of unruly dark hair. A large brown envelope was under one arm when he came in. The second entered soon after, looked around and then sat down next to him on the empty half of a double stool. The brown envelope was between them. Neither spoke but anyone watching could tell they were aware of each other.

The second man was shorter, older, and heavier. After a few sips of coffee he took a business-size white envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket and laid it down beside the other. The tall man picked it up quickly, then dropped it. The second time he managed to tuck it away in his own pocket.

The short man drank more coffee, then got up and left. The brown envelope was in his right hand. It was an amateurish performance, but no one else had noticed. That's the way it is, people too wrapped up in themselves to see what's going on unless it's flashed in front of them on a television screen.

I followed the short man outside. He walked north on Spring Street past the floodwall to a burgundy Buick Riviera facing south. As he drove by I made a mental note of the license number, then took a final look at the choppy gray water and walked north myself.

WHEN I GOT TO THE TOP OF THE STAIRS SELMA OLDS greeted me with the smile she pastes on when someone is sharing her reception area. Then in the starchy tone reserved for formal occasions she said, "Mrs. Mannweiler is here to see you, Mr. Rakich."

If Mrs. Mannweiler had been waiting for the doctor, dentist, or real estate broker who shared the communal reception room I would have gotten a business-like nod from Selma. Had she had the place to herself it would have been a grin and, "Long coffee break, Jack."

Mrs. Mannweiler sat ramrod-stiff on a wooden bench against the wall. She was about twenty-five and not attractive. Her nose was too prominent, her mouth too large. When she stood up the baggy brown skirt that was overly long even for her rangy frame showed its need of a pressing. But when she brushed aside a lock of stringy hamster-colored hair and smiled, I decided I liked her.

She followed my lead to a door with *Wellington's National Detective Agency—Louisville Branch* painted in black letters on its frosted glass. It looked impressive even if Louisville was in another state across the river.

After getting her settled in a chair beside my desk, I sat down myself and uncapped a pen. "Is that Mannweiler with one n or two?"

"Two. The first name is Margaret but people call me Maggie."

The nickname fit her best. I jotted all of them on a legal pad. When I looked up our eyes met and held a moment, then she leaned closer and said, "I want you to find my father."

I waited, so she relaxed in her chair again. "He's been missing three days."

"You've notified the police?"

"My stepmother has."

I laid the pen on the desk. "The police are better equipped to find him."

She shook her head impatiently. "But they have no reason to. He hasn't committed a crime and he isn't a prominent person."

I smiled, but not much. She had the situation pretty well in focus so I said, "Granted they won't drop the rapes and murders, but they'll do what they can. What's your father's name and what does he do?"

"Raymond Leeth—that's double E. He's an engineer at VTA Electronics."

"It doesn't ring bells."

"VTA is a small plant just off the interstate near Sellersburg. They make computer components. My father's been there since it started in business seven years ago."

"What's VTA stand for?"

"Vaughn Thresher and Associates."

"Your father's an associate?"

"No, he's an employee. Associates are stockholders."

I made a note of the names, then leaned back and said, "So what's it all about?"

She chewed her lower lip, frowning, then took a deep breath. "He left home Saturday morning—this is what my stepmother says—and no one has seen him since. He's never done anything like this before."

"When was the last time you saw him yourself?"

"We had lunch together a week ago today."

"Did he seem worried or different in any way?"

"Not a bit."

"Think back to your parting. Was it unusual, was there any indication you might not see each other again?"

She shook her head. "Then you think he was planning to disappear?"

I smiled, trying to make it reassuring. "I haven't gotten around to thinking anything yet. You don't live with him and your stepmother?"

"I have my own apartment." She hesitated, then added, "I'm separated from my husband."

"Does he live in town?"

"Yes. Well, not Jeffersonville. Across the river in Louisville."

I studied her features a moment. Each in itself was nothing to boast about but together they made an interesting composite. Her brown eyes continued flecks of green, and a bit of twinkle when she realized she was under scrutiny.

I cleared my throat and said, "When you mentioned your stepmother you seemed doubtful about her."

She gnawed her lip again. "It isn't that I doubt her word. It's just that I never know how certain she is about anything because she drinks too much." She blinked her eyes, then laughed quietly. "I hate it when I get euphemistic. What I meant was, Katie's an alcoholic."

"How long has she been married to your father?"

"A little more than seven years."

"Have they had trouble?"

"No, they pretty much go their separate ways. I suppose you could call that trouble in itself, though."

I straightened up again, ready to end it. "I'll have to talk to her," I said.

She reached for my pen and notepad. "Of course, I'll write down her address. Mine, too, and two numbers where you can reach me." When she finished writing she opened her purse and said, "How much?"

I grinned at her abruptness. "Two hundred a day. Let's start with that."

"That means I'll have to come back tomorrow."

"Even this job has its compensations."

She looked at me a few seconds, then stood up, blushing a little. My eyes followed her to the door. There was an animal magnetism about her that more than made up for any lack of cosmetic charm.

THE HOUSE WAS ONE I HAD NOTICED BEFORE BECAUSE OF its unusual square tower that began as an arched entryway, then rose three stories. The tower was no more than ten feet square, crowned by a mansard roof with gabled windows on all four sides and wrought iron trim on top. There was a single window on three sides of the second floor and a pair of tall arched ones facing each direction on the third. The house was red brick with white stone at each corner, a small roofed porch at the right of the front door, a sun room extending from the opposite or west side. It was a striking edifice well over a century old. From the top windows of the tower I was certain you could see the Ohio River several blocks south. A lookout so someone now long-dead could watch the comings and goings of the steamboats.

A wrought iron fence enclosed an untended yard. As I opened the

gate and walked up the sidewalk a curtain was drawn aside from a window to my left. I pretended not to notice.

The woman who opened the door looked sixty-five but I judged her age to be at least ten years after that. A stained, loose fitting black dress added to the aura of physical and emotional emaciation Katie Leeth projected. Her hair hadn't seen a comb in days and her lifeless gray eyes were set deep in clearly defined skeletal pockets above dark pouches.

I flashed my identification but she didn't bother to look. "I'm Jack Rakich," I told her. "Your stepdaughter hired me to find your husband."

"Maggie hired you?" she said vacantly. "Come inside, then."

The house had a stale, unclean odor. I followed her into a room opening left off the entryway. She motioned toward a chair and when I hesitated said, "Go on, nothing that crawls will get on you."

Her voice had grown more forceful after the surprise of having a visitor wore off. She eased herself into a chair next to a small table holding a bottle of Gilbey's gin and a half-empty glass. I sat in one facing her and said, "Any objection to what I'm doing?"

Her laugh rang hollowly in the musty room. "It doesn't matter one way or another to me."

"That bad, is it?"

"Not bad, not good, not anything."

"Maggie seems to think highly of your husband."

"Why not? He's been a good father, I suppose."

"But not a good husband?"

She stared off in space a moment. "An indifferent husband, but I knew that about him before we were married. I can't really blame him, we never pretended to be in love. Sometimes I wonder why we even bothered. To get married, I mean."

"How did you meet?"

"Raymond worked for my father. We went out together sometimes, more for convenience than anything else. Business-related social affairs as often as not. So one day we got married."

She drank from the glass beside her, then laughed harshly. "I honestly can't remember why, or how the subject even came up. It just happened."

"Was it your first marriage?"

She nodded her head a good five seconds, then took another drink. "I suppose that had something to do with it. I was past forty and had given up hope. Not that I'd ever had much anyway. So Raymond came along and was pleasant and, well . . . "

"Was he a widower?"

"No, divorced before he went to work for father. You know about the plant in Bloomington, don't you?"

I shook my head so she said, "Father owned an electronics plant and Raymond was one of his engineers. Not a very good one, though, if you want the truth. More of a librarian, I'd call him. He kept track of things for the *real* engineers."

"Why did he leave?"

"Because there was nothing to stay for; the plant went under a few months after we married. The chief engineer, Vaughn Thresher, had left a short time before to start his own business down here. He took Raymond on, God knows why. Maybe he needed a librarian."

I waited until she emptied her glass, then said, "I didn't think electronic plants went broke these days. What happened?"

She picked up the bottle and held it toward me. "I'm forgetting my manners, care for a drink?"

Raw gin can make for a short happy hour but I said, "A small one," so she went to another room, came back with a second glass and poured three fingers for me. I swallowed a little of it, then repeated the question about her father's business.

She stared off in space again, lips pursed, then turned to me, both palms upward. "Who knows what happened? Father told me it was piracy, somebody stealing his secrets. They had been developing some new concept or new method of manufacturing, I never did understand the technical points. Whatever, without it the plant wasn't competitive. The business was about to go under, so one night father went home and shot himself."

Her voice had remained steady but there were tears on her cheeks. I decided it was time to switch the conversation back to the present. "You have no idea why your husband left or where he went?"

She dabbed at her cheeks with the end of a ruffled sleeve. "I don't know where he's gone, but I think he left because his scheme had turned sour."

"What scheme was that?"

"I'm not sure what it was, but he had one." She stood up and walked to the center hall, motioning for me to follow. When we reached a room that appeared to be a man's study she went to an old rolltop desk and pulled out a drawer.

"Raymond always kept his desk locked," she said. "He'd have a fit if I even went near it, but after he pulled his disappearing act I decided it was time to see what was so important he had to keep it under lock and key."

I could see where she had jimmied the lock, probably with a screwdriver. She took a bank passbook from a stack of papers in the drawer and handed it to me. "Here, take a look at this."

I pulled the book from its plastic sleeve, flipped pages to the last entry, then whistled softly. "Eighty-one thousand dollars. You didn't know about this?"

"Never even a hint."

"It's a lot of money to keep in a savings account at low interest." I turned back to the front of the book and began reading entries page by page. There had been no withdrawals.

"Regular as clockwork," I said, "a thousand dollar deposit every month for eighty-one months. This was over and above his salary at VTA Electronics?"

"A thousand dollars a month over it."

I compared recent dates in the book with a plastic calendar in my wallet. "Another deposit was due Monday. It's too consistent to be gambling winnings and too much for you to be unaware of unless he was making a lot more money than you knew about. That happens sometimes."

She made a scornful sound. "Raymond didn't earn it."

I tapped the bankbook against the desk for a moment, wondering why Raymond Leeth would leave it behind if he planned to disappear. I said, "Mind if I look around a while?"

Katie Leeth shrugged, no longer interested. She walked out of the room, leaving me alone.

The desk was a labyrinth of cubbyholes and deep drawers with a secret compartment or two probably hidden somewhere. A thorough reading of every document would have taken days and even a cursory search required two hours. The only thing that aroused my curiosity was a phone bill for a Louisville address in the name R. Leath. A billing error, possibly, but it didn't seem likely because a different phone company operated across the river in Kentucky.

Darkness was settling in, my stomach told me the supper hour had come and gone. I slipped the phone bill in my pocket and walked back to the front of the house.

Katie Leeth was alone in the dusky living room, the bottle of gin beside her. "I'm leaving now," I told her. She didn't reply or even bother to look up.

I THOUGHT ABOUT RAYMOND LEETH OVER PIZZA AND chianti at an Italian restaurant on Market across from the shipyard. I could see why he might have decided to chuck it all and start over as Bill

Jones in San Diego. I couldn't see why he would leave $81,000 behind. A few visions of what I'd do with that kind of money came to mind. I settled on drifting down the Ohio, then the Mississippi, feet propped on the railing of a small houseboat.

By day the block-long City-County Building was an imposing structure. After dark I always found it somber and oppressive, probably because only the two police stations were open for business. I parked close to the justice wing that formed the shorter portion of an L, then entered double doors facing the Jeffersonville and Clark County police departments. At the first a detective checked a report, shrugged and said, "Nothing." The answer was the same next door.

"What kind of car does he drive?"

"An eighty-three New Yorker. Deep red."

I thought about crossing the river to Louisville, but instead settled for dialing the number on the phone bill in my pocket. No one answered, so I headed for my apartment.

It was raining when I pushed a curtain aside and looked out on a gray dawn. I brewed coffee, popped a couple of pieces of bread in the toaster, read the morning paper, shaved and showered. The rain had stopped by the time I started out but low gray clouds remained behind. The Sunny Side of Louisville wasn't living up to its name.

After leaving Interstate 65 at the Sellersburg exit I drove west a short distance to a blue prefabricated building that was VTA Electronics. One story of characterless sheet metal, little different than dozens of others close to the interstates in the metropolitan area. Even the receptionist who turned on a corporate smile when I walked in looked like she came with the package.

Getting in to see Vaughn Thresher was almost too easy. I wondered if all unannounced visitors were handed a cup of coffee, then ushered into his private office with time for only a couple of quick gulps. Down-home Hoosier informality seemed a little incongruous in a high-tech setting.

The old-buddy atmosphere apparently originated with Thresher because he was coming around his desk, hand outstretched, when I walked in. He was a beefy character with shirtsleeves rolled twice, sparse hair plastered close to his scalp, a complexion that was too ruddy for his own good. The kind who could have cost me money in a bar because I would have bet he was a salesman, not an engineer or corporate president.

Thresher gave me a hand-on escort to a chair that was functional and lacking warmth like everything else in the office. When he was settled behind his glass and metal desk again he said, "Maggie called the first

thing to say you probably would be stopping by. Incomprehensible, this business about her dad."

"I guess that means you have no idea why Raymond Leeth might want to disappear?"

"None whatsoever. Ray was the last person on earth I would have pegged for a thing like that. I had very bad vibes about it right from the start."

Very bad vibes moved up right behind *at this point in time* on my hate list after politicians quite using *viable*. I played along, though, and asked, "Why in particular are your vibes bad?"

Thresher pursed his lips and formed a tent with his fingers. "Well, for one thing Ray was a very conservative person in most respects. And very much a creature of habit."

"In what respect wasn't he conservative?" I was also playing along with Thresher's use of the past tense.

"I wouldn't say this under any other circumstances, understand, but hearing about some of the places he was seen hanging out always bothered me. Not so much the riverfront taverns, but"—he paused to giggle self-consciously—"but bars where you find young men and sexual preference might be in question."

"Gay bars, you mean. Are you saying Leeth was a chickenhawk?"

"Oh, no, don't get me wrong. I just heard things, understand, but you can't help wonder, know what I mean? I just hope he didn't take the wrong person home with him."

"Home with him? He took men home with him?"

Thresher's laugh was forced. "Poor choice of words. I didn't mean *home* literally, know what I mean?"

I thought I probably did. "How long have you known Leeth?" I asked, switching the tense back to present.

"Ten, eleven years. Ray and I worked together at a plant in Bloomington before I started this place. His wife's father owned it, matter of fact."

"From what you said before it must have come as a surprise when he married the boss's daughter."

"Not a bit. Ray Leeth may not have been the best engineer in the world and he may have had some questionable habits, but no one could say he didn't know how to feather his own nest. It didn't work out, of course; her father's business went under."

"Why was that?" I asked, pretending I didn't know.

"Outmoded ideas. The old man was set in his ways; you know how they get so no one can tell them anything. The company fell behind, couldn't compete in today's world."

"But you left before that happened?"

Thresher had a problem letting go of old cliches when new ones came along. He said, "Right. I could see the handwriting on the wall and bailed out. Came down here and set up shop for myself."

"And hired Raymond Leeth. Why, if he wasn't a good engineer?"

The question caught Thresher off guard but you wouldn't have known it if you missed his few quick blinks. "Guess I felt a little sorry for him. Katie, too. But don't get me wrong about Ray. He wasn't what you would call a creative thinker, but what he did, he did well."

"His wife calls him a librarian."

Thresher laughed tersely. "Katie was never one to mince words. Maybe that summed him up, but remember a place like this needs a good librarian or whatever you want to call it to operate efficiently."

I edged forward on my chair and said, "Mind if I take a look around the plant?"

"Not at all. Go wherever you like; we're very informal around here. Pride ourselves on that."

I WANDERED AIMLESSLY A WHILE, THINKING THE PRODUCTION area didn't look too busy but reminding myself I knew nothing about such operations. Probably all automated so a few people could do the work of a hundred not too many years before.

The offices were laid out in a long row toward the front of the building and seemed busier. I paused to look through a glass door under a sign that read *Engineering*. People were working at tilt tables and I wondered which was Raymond Leeth's, or if he even had one. I turned to go, then stopped when a tall, round-shouldered man carrying several rolled charts came out of an anteroom.

It was the man who had exchanged a large brown envelope for a smaller white one at the diner the previous afternoon. I smiled wryly. It looked like VTA was priding itself on the wrong thing.

Rain began falling again as I drove south on back roads that would take me to Spring Street. I found a place to park, then sat a few minutes contemplating the old two-story brick buildings along Jeffersonville's main thoroughfare, wishing it would stop raining and wondering why I hadn't brought a raincoat.

I finally made a run for it and wasn't more than half soaked when I started up the stairs to the office. Several people sat thumbing ragged magazines in the reception area. A shake of Velma's head told me none wanted to see me. After drying off a little I skimmed over a thick packet of material from the home office, then dialed the number of a business writer for one of the Louisville newspapers, a man who owed

me a favor or two.

He told me the word going around was that VTA was in trouble. Rumor had it that industrial espionage was the core of the problem. From what he said it was a bigger thing than I had realized, especially in the electronic field. He gave me a little background on Vaughn Thresher—the usual PR stuff—but had never heard of Raymond Leeth.

Next I rang one of the numbers Maggie Mannweiler had left me. When she answered I said, "How about coffee?" She said okay so I named the cafeteria across the street.

Maggie was breathless when she sat down at a table I had picked as far from the other late-morning coffee drinkers as possible. She wiped the water from her face with a paper napkin, then tugged at the wet sleeves clinging to her arms.

"On a day like this you should carry a raincoat," I told her.

She looked around. "Where's yours?"

"I just had to cross the street. There's nothing much to report, but I have a couple of questions. What do you know about industrial espionage? It seems to follow your father around."

She drew herself up, bristling. "Are you implying he's some sort of spy?"

"I'm asking, not implying. It put the plant in Bloomington out of business and now VTA's having the same problem."

Her grip on the edge of the table was so tight her knuckles stood out like eight white knobs. "And you think my father is involved?"

"Say he had a lot of money that couldn't be traced to an explainable source. Any idea where he might have gotten it?"

"Is there a lot of money?"

"Look, we're sitting here asking each other questions but you're not getting paid for it. How about some answers?"

She relaxed her hold on the table and leaned back, the spirit draining from her. "No, I have no idea where it came from or if it even exists. Dad's always been good to me, but not communicative. I know very little about his professional life, but he's a loner, a very private person. I can't picture him being involved in anything that complex."

We drank coffee without saying more for a while, then I said, "I've got another question, and try not to take this one the wrong way. Were there other women in his life?"

She gave me a look of disbelief, then put her head back and laughed. "Glad I'm so entertaining," I told her, so she stopped laughing and leaned toward me, saying, "Why on earth would you ask me that? Surely you can't believe a man would brag about his conquests to his

own daughter."

"Okay, then, here's the capper. How about other men in his life?"

It took her a minute to comprehend what I meant, then her cheeks grew fiery. "No," she whispered. After a long pause she said, louder than before, "I'm not trying to be uncooperative, I just don't have the answers to the questions you're asking. How much do most daughters know about their father's private life? Dad and I have been close enough, I think, but that doesn't mean we've shared intimacies."

"Isn't that the way it usually is between parent and child? Isn't it a two-way street of trying to appear better than we are to those close to us?"

She set her cup down, staring across the table at me a moment. Then she said, "You don't impress me as a man who's ever been close to many people."

I crumpled a half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray. "Sometime I'll tell you the story of my life, but right now you're not paying me to hand out any more dime-store philosophy. I have something to check out in Louisville, then I'll get back to you."

THE RAIN HAD STOPPED AGAIN, THE LOW OVERCAST GIVing way to patchy clouds and a wind that stirred the water under the Clark Bridge. A tug pushing four barges toward Cincinnati or Pittsburgh hooted from below. As usual, the illusion that the troubles found on shore don't follow you up and down the river gave me some sort of melancholy satisfaction.

The address I wanted turned out to be a three-story apartment on a corner a couple of miles south of the downtown Galleria. It was an old building of buff brick, well cared for and having an air of permanence and stability in a neighborhood of large homes converted to multi-family use half a century earlier.

I ran a finger along a bank of carefully polished brass mailboxes inside the vestibule. When I came to R. Leath I pushed the button beside it a few times without getting a response. The latch hadn't caught on the inner door so I walked inside and on up the stairs to the top floor, then along a wide hallway past doors unable to completely muffle the sound of television sets on the other side.

I knocked lightly at the last apartment on the top floor, but again without result. A sharp-edged credit card had the door open in seconds. As it swung aside the odor that rushed to meet me made me think I had found Raymond Leeth, however he spelled it south of the Ohio.

I kicked the door shut behind me, breathing through my mouth, reminding myself that I only played a role and somebody else wrote the

script.

The body lay on its side at one corner of the kitchen, knees drawn up, left hand clutched against its chest. The right one gripped a knife handle snapped from its blade. The deadly half was imbedded in the chest of the man I recognized from the photograph Maggie had given me.

I looked around the room until I came to a wooden rack with slots for five knives. Four were in place, each with a handle matching the one in Leeth's right hand. A spur-of-the-moment murder, I decided, with the killer making use of the handiest weapon.

The first phone call I didn't mind, the one to the homicide unit downtown. But if there had been a way to avoid calling Maggie Mannweiler I would have jumped at it.

THE BOYS FROM HOMICIDE ARRIVED ABOUT THE TIME I was finishing my second cigarette in a chair facing the open door to the outside hall. Bailey, the first one in, went out of his way to play the big dumb cop. It was just an act that sometimes made his job easier; he was as sharp a detective as you'd find west of the Alleghenies.

He turned to the smaller man behind him. "Jacot, say hello to our friend, the Hoosier shamus." To me he said, "What, you're getting in the habit of bringing your bodies this side of the river and dumping them?"

I gave him a half-hearted smile, then nodded over one shoulder toward the kitchen. "The body's in there. Raymond Leeth, an engineer at VTA Electronics over on the other side. He pulled a Judge Crater four days ago."

"My nose already told me. Where do you fit in?"

"His daughter hired me to find him."

"And—?"

I grinned at him. "Indiana law says I *may* tell you, it doesn't say I *shall* tell you."

"They're spending a fortune fixing up this neighborhood but to you it still looks like Indiana. Now give."

So I gave him everything I had except a couple of suspicions. Halfway through my spiel Jacot came back from the kitchen to greet the lab crew. When I finished, Bailey said:

"I see it this guy's up to his eyeballs in industrial espionage so somebody decides to put a stop to it. Somebody like your friend Vaughn Thresher. I'm gonna have the county police over there set it up to talk to him."

While Bailey used the phone I walked out in the hall for some air that was a little fresher. From a window overlooking an alley I could see a

red New Yorker in a parking stall. After a couple of minutes Bailey bellowed, "Rakich!" I went back inside and found him standing in the center of the living room, hands on hips.

"Would you believe they got their own murder over there?" he said. "Yeah, I can see you would."

It was more than that, I knew. Something closer to home. I said, "Who?"

"Your boy Thresher has gone and got himself killed. So tell me, just where does *that* leave us?"

Jacot had come back into the room. He said, "Suppose the pirate at VTA knew Leeth was wise so he came here and took care of that. Then Thresher got onto him, and ditto."

Bailey started to say something but I got in first with, "Where and how was Thresher killed?"

"Gunned down," Bailey said, "as he was going in a private door at the side of his factory on the way back from lunch. The killer was lying in wait outside, but he gets no sharpshooter's badge. Six shots—probably emptied a revolver—and one hits Thresher. Five scattered around the doorway but the other got him where it hurt most."

I said, "Say Jacot's right, I might have an idea. I'll check it out and let you know."

Bailey turned a bearish scowl my way. "You're going back over? Give us a name first."

"I don't have one. When I do, you'll be the first to know."

Bailey said, "I have bad vibes about this."

I laughed on the way out the door. "We'll be waiting," Bailey called after me.

My call was put through to him an hour later. "That name, it's Daniel Routh. But you don't want him. Let the Clark County police pick him up for peddling plant secrets if they feel like it. That's all he did."

Bailey growled into the phone.

"I checked him out," I told Bailey. "He was in St. Louis from Friday afternoon until Sunday night. It's confirmed, and he was having lunch with three people when Thresher was shot."

"So that leaves us up a stump, right?"

"No, you called it on the nose the first time. Thresher killed Leeth. Leeth knew he was the one who stole secrets at the plant in Bloomington, then used them to open his own place down here. So Leeth collected ever since—first a job, then a thousand under the table every month.

"But then Thresher fell victim to his own game. He was going broke

fast, thanks to piracy. He didn't have the cash to go on paying Leeth, and on top of that he suspected Leeth himself was the pirate. So he talked to him Saturday morning, but Leeth wouldn't let him off the hook. They argued back and forth, then Thresher grabbed a knife and ended it the only other way he could think of."

Bailey made a clucking sound with his tongue a while. There was an edge to his voice when he said, "So just going on your hunch we're supposed to wrap this up saying a dead man's the killer? That'll go over great."

"Look, you were right about it from the start. I'm sending a kid over with a photo of Thresher and when you show it around I'll bet you find he was a regular Saturday visitor at the apartment. I'll also bet he was the only one who knew about Leeth's hideaway, the place he went to forget his troubles every chance he got."

Bailey wasn't happy, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

I WAS STARTING UP THE STEPS WHEN KATIE LEECH opened the front door of her house. She looked more relaxed, even smiled a little. "I've been waiting for you," she said.

"You know about your husband?"

"It was on the radio a while ago."

I waited until I was in the same chair again and she was in hers, but without a bottle alongside this time. Then I said, "You killed Vaughn Thresher, didn't you? You finally put it together from the dates in that bankbook."

She smiled again. "You did it for me. I knew Raymond hadn't come by the money honestly, but I hadn't paid enough attention until you spelled it out. Then it was all clear as could be—the reason Vaughn gave him the job, everything."

She paused, shaking her head and still halfway smiling. "Strange, isn't it? All these years and it never once occurred to me that Vaughn had been the one. He and father were always so close, that's what I don't understand. And the ideas he stole, why they really were his own."

"When you shot Thresher you didn't know he had killed your husband, did you?"

She shook her head absently. "Did he?" she said, but without interest. "You know it pushed father into bankruptcy. He put so much of himself into that plant, and then to be betrayed by his most trusted employee. More than an employee, he thought Vaughn was his friend. It killed father, did I tell you that?"

There were tears on her cheeks again. She brushed them aside, pulled

out a drawer from the table next to her, removed an old six-shot revolver and handed it to me, saying, "Would you be kind enough to call the police and explain?"

MAGGIE HAD BEEN CRYING, TOO, WHEN I FOUND HER waiting outside the office. Later, after filling in the gaps for her, I said, "You owe the agency for another half a day's work but I'm not going to make an issue of it."

She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue, then gave me her surprised look and something that was midway between a laugh and a sob. "You surely didn't expect me to argue the point, did you?"

"I wouldn't blame you. There hasn't been any good news to report."

"Is that what you normally do, guarantee a happy ending?"

I smiled at her. It was no prize winner, but she gave me one of her own. Then she sank back in her chair, wrinkling her brow and sighing. "It's going to be difficult thinking of dad as a blackmailer."

"Don't, then," I told her. "Don't moralize. He was under terrific pressure seven years ago. Out of a job, a teenage daughter to get through school, a wife devastated by the loss of her own father.

"But I think what bothered him more than anything else was knowing he wasn't respected as an engineer. He could see only one way out, take advantage of what he knew about Vaughn Thresher. Then when it worked and he had a job again, he decided to go one step further. You'll never know why—he may not have himself—but try to take into account the strain he had been under. The strange thing is, or maybe it isn't, he never spent a penny of the money he didn't earn."

She sat quietly a moment, then opened her purse. "I'll write you a check now." She stood up as she handed it to me, smiling as best she could. "Thanks, I do appreciate what you've done."

I locked the office behind us and followed her down the stairs. On the sidewalk she turned with another halfway smile, then walked south to a rusty little Toyota. As she bent to unlock the door I called, "Maggie."

Her head turned and I said, "Unless you have other plans, how about a drink and something to eat?"

She smiled—a broad one this time—and hurried back along the sidewalk. ●

The door flew off its hinges and slammed to the floor. Framed in the doorway were two women with a perfectly matched pair of Uzi machine guns!

Special Delivery

by TERRY BLACK and J. B. ALLEN

"THE DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU NOW, MR. DREXLER," SAID the receptionist, raising an eyebrow.

"Uh, thanks." I put the June issue of *Morning Sickness Monthly* back on the coffee table and got up off the vinyl couch. The cushions made rude sucking noises. I worked my way between two turgid matrons in maternity smocks and orthopedic stockings, ignoring their venomous glances.

"Straight through there," she said, stabbing her pen at an unmarked door. I pushed through it into a meandering hallway, lined with glossy photos of prune-wrinkled newborns on fluffy satin pillows.

To my left was a door marked CUTHBERT TIMMONS, OB/GYN. It opened onto an office cluttered with dog-eared journals and cutaway anatomical diagrams. Diplomas in unreadable Gothic lined the walls. The doctor was nowhere to be seen.

I considered my options. I could grow old in Timmons' office, waiting for him. I could about-face and get the hell out of there. Or I could arm myself with one of my bullet-proof apologies and go looking for the doctor.

But where to look?

The logical place was behind a door marked EXAMINATION ROOM. I hesitated, with my hand on the doorknob. The way my luck was running, this could land me in the slam on a morals charge.

I took a deep breath and flung the door open.

The room was small and austere, its only furniture a swivel chair and examination table. A canister of anesthetic stood by the wall. Shelves held an assortment of medical utensils and sterile dressings.

"Good morning, Mr. Drexler," said Cuthbert Timmons, MD, looking up from a clipboard. He had limpid brown eyes, spaced far apart, and a moist, blunt nose. "Have a seat," he said, gesturing at the table.

I eyed it suspiciously. "If you ask to put my feet in the stirrups, I'm leaving."

"Just sit down, Mr. Drexler."

I eased myself onto the table and eyed him carefully. "I take it you want some insurance."

"That's right."

"Well, you're making a wise choice," I said. "In these uncertain times—"

"Save it," said Timmons. "I want a five million dollar policy, payable in the event of my death, effective immediately."

"Don't you even want to—"

"Nope. Hurry up, I'm a busy man." Timmons folded his arms and tapped his fingers on his bicep.

Now, I've never been one to check for bridgework in a gift horse's mouth, but there was something about his manner that was odd, to say the least. So I hesitated, fumbling with the policy in my inside pocket, trying to figure the angles.

"Of course, we'll have to arrange a physical."

"Already done." Timmons handed me a stack of multicolored pages. "This what you need?"

I nodded. "You seem to have all the bases covered."

"I do my best," said the doctor, whipping out an orange marker pen. "Where do I sign?"

"First you have to fill in the policy value and beneficiary list," I explained. "Plus your personal background, credit history, business references—"

"Where?" he demanded, his pen poised over the page.

I TALKED HIM THROUGH IT, EXPLAINING AND POINTING. The doctor didn't waste a syllable. Finally, after about ten minutes, our standard vanilla policy had been converted into a detailed description of the rather extravagant protection Continental Mutual would provide for Cuthbert Timmons.

"At last," he said, scratching his illegible John Hancock on the dotted line. His signature was a bright orange scrawl across the page. "Are we done?"

"Absolutely," I said, handing him his copy. "On behalf of the entire Continental Mutual family—"

"Later," he said, hustling me toward the door. Always the salesman, I blurted over my shoulder, "How about a nice annuity . . . ?"

Timmons' answer was cut short as the door flew off its hinges and slammed to the floor. Framed in the doorway were the two women I'd irritated in the waiting room. From under their smocks they had produced a perfectly matched pair of Uzi machine guns, which they pointed expertly at Timmons' thorax.

"You've whacked your last bottom, Doc," said the one on the left, jerking back the bolt. She had rodent eyes, scouring-pad hair and skin like a broiled hamburger. She was a lot less pregnant than five minutes ago.

Her partner drew a bead on me.

"Wait!" I squealed, raising my hands. Dying was bad enough, but if Mrs. Drexler's little boy Marv was gunned down in an obstetrician's office the family would never understand. "Can't we discuss this?"

Burger-Face's eyes narrowed. "Button it, Ace. We're on a tight schedule."

Timmons leaned against the wall. "Sorry, ladies, but you'll need an appointment. See the girl at the desk."

"Already did. We left her in the supply cabinet, bound at the wrists and ankles. Stand away from the window, please."

"Look," I piped, "I'm sort of new at this—"

She gestured with the barrel of the Uzi. "On your knees, hands behind your head."

I groaned. I've often wanted more attention from women, but I like my girls a little more sedate. Unconscious, even. The assassins made snarling noise and got ready to fire.

"Smell anything?" asked Timmons pleasantly.

Everyone stared at him. "Are you nuts?" Burger-Face demanded.

"Take a deep breath," he continued. "It's ether. I'll bet they used it on you when you were spayed."

She bristled, but eyed him carefully. "What are you talking about?"

Timmons stood aside to reveal an upright cylinder with C4H100 stenciled up the side. From the valve came a hissing sound. "I use this stuff for outpatient surgery," he explained. "Did you know it's highly explosive? One burst from that cannon you're cradling and we'll find ourselves in the stratosphere."

I yawned. "It also makes you drowsy."

Color drained from the women's faces. They exchanged uncertain glances. Burger-Face worked her mouth silently, then lowered her Uzi.

"Get the window, Marv," the doctor ordered. He twisted the valve to its full open position. "Sweet dreams, ladies."

By now I'd yanked the window open, and filled my lungs with fresh air. I helped Timmons over the sill and followed him, throwing one last glance over my shoulder.

I didn't like what I saw.

Burger-Face had dipped into her blouse and came up with a glistening, star-shaped pendant, inscribed in Chinese. She snapped it free of its chain and held it poised between thumb and forefinger. I remembered reading something about Oriental throwing stars, and how deadly they were at close range.

Then her hand came down and the whistling disk came straight at my windpipe.

TIMMONS BARELY SAVED ME. HE GRABBED THE SEAT OF my trousers and yanked hard, flopping me down over the windowsill like a garment bag. The star hit the wall and stuck there, with a murderous *thunk*.

Burger-Face took a step toward me, assuming a martial arts crouch. Her partner groped in her blouse for another pendant. Both looked unhappy.

I'd like to say that I turned and ran, but instead I did something stupid. I grabbed the stuck star and tried to work it loose. I was still trying when another whizzed past and *thunked* into the windowframe. I jerked back and the star came loose in my hand.

Burger-Face charged forward, making a sound the human mouth was never designed for. I flung the star right at her. It sang through the air, curving sharply, missing its target by a country mile.

Instead, it hit the ether tank.

Something went BOOM! and the building seemed to hiccup, and a hot belch smelling vaguely of burnt pork knocked me clean across the sidewalk and onto my tailbone. Smoke poured from the building.

"I think you made a spark," said Timmons.

He was beside me on the pavement, looking as shaken as I felt. I

groaned and rubbed my neck. "I assume this has something to do with the policy I just sold you."

"Maybe. But it's too late now. As soon as they get me you owe Mrs. Timmons five million big ones." He got up and dusted himself off, looking for a little worse for wear. I got up too.

"Perhaps you'll tell me what this is all about," I suggested.

"Sure thing," he said, setting off for the parking lot. I jogged to keep up with him. "You see, I'm in a bit of a bind."

"No kidding."

"Two weeks ago I acquired a new patient, Francine, a platinum blonde whose hair was *not* its natural color. She had a purse you could serve dinner from and the ugliest bodyguard I'd ever seen." He guided me to a brand-new peach-colored Mercedes and held the door for me. "Seems she'd been a little indiscreet and wanted a pregnancy test."

I settled into the leather seat as Timmons hopped in beside me. He started the car and let it warm up for a minute.

"While the test was out I got a call from this guy with a voice like a gravel pit. Turns out it's her father. He introduced himself as Knuckles Dermicelli."

I whistled. "*The* Knuckles Dermicelli?"

"How many are there?"

"One's plenty." Knuckles was a kingpin for the local mob; a padrone of the old school, he'd risen to power among the crazed hoods of Long Beach and even *they* thought he was nuts. Rumor had it that Knuckles' business kept half the city's morticians from going under.

I braced myself. "What did he want?"

"He wanted to know what the hell his daughter was doing in my office. I told him and there was this long silence over the phone. I scratched out my will on a prescription pad. Then he grunted and said he wanted to know as soon as the results came in, so he could send Nunzio over to pick them up."

"Who's Nunzio?"

"Francine's bodyguard. Think of Godzilla in a cheap suit. Only bigger, and more obnoxious. I got rid of him fast because he was scaring the patients. He gave the report to Knuckles and that's when everything went to hell."

"He's mad because she's pregnant?"

"No. He's mad because she's *not* pregnant. He said he wanted to put my head on a stake in his lawn to scare off crows."

"I'm lost. What's wrong with his daughter not being pregnant?"

Timmons slumped against the steering wheel. "The report said she *was*. They must have mixed up the samples in the lab."

"But wait a minute! What are they so mad about? Accidents happen. Now that they know the happy truth, why not forget the whole thing?"

Timmons looked miserable. "I'm afraid it's not that easy, Marv. Before we straightened them out, Knuckles had a little talk with Francine's boyfriend. I guess he lost his temper."

"Where's the boyfriend now?"

"At the bottom of the marina. I never met him face-to-face, but I hear he was a great dancer."

"So Francine's an unmarried widow and her father's mad as hell?"

"And I'm done for," said Timmons.

"Charming." I sniffed. "Do you notice a funny smell in here?"

"It's the upholstery, Marv. Brand new leather."

"Besides that."

"Give me a hint."

I frowned. "Sort of metallic and stagnant-smelling."

Timmons shrugged. "You figure it out, I'm getting us out of here." He put the car in DRIVE and hit the gas. Nothing happened. He pumped it a couple of times, checked the brake, shifted out of gear and back again. Still nothing.

"I don't like this," he muttered.

I hesitated. My next words were not calculated to cheer him up any, but I figured I might as well tell him. "I recognize the smell now," I said grimly.

"What is it?"

"Car exhaust. Carbon monoxide." My ears were ringing, and I felt a headache settling in. My fingers had a bluish tinge. I could hardly feel them as I grabbed the door latch and said, "Uh-oh."

"What's wrong?"

"My door won't open."

Timmons yanked at his. "Mine too."

"Wonderful. Turn off the ignition."

He tried to. The key was locked in place. He gave me the sort of look you see on a puppy at the dog pound.

"If you'll pardon the expression," I said wearily, "I think they doctored the car."

"I hate it when people think ahead. What'll we do?"

"Break the windows."

"They're shatterproof. Cost me a bundle." He slumped against the seat and closed his eyes.

I looked outside. A crowd was gathering, not around us but at the burning office across the lawn. Frantically I waved my arms, trying to attract attention. The only response was from a little kid in a Dodgers

cap whose mother kept brushing him off.

Finally a policeman came by, herding people away from the building. He seemed determined to ignore us. In desperation I made the gesture that once got me suspended from grammar school and held it until he noticed.

It wasn't long. In four strides he was beside the car, glaring into the window. He poked a finger at me and said something tough-sounding. I stuck my tongue out at him. He flung open the door and I toppled outward onto the pavement, gulping oxygen.

"Listen," he snapped, "you better watch how you act around a peace officer . . . "

HE LET US OFF WITH A WARNING AND I HALF-DRAGGED, half-carried Timmons to the nearest working pay phone. He slept it off on a bench that said FOREST LAWN while I stuck in two dimes and dialed the office.

"Continental Mutual," said Flavia.

"Marv."

"I'm sorry, Marv's out of the office. May I take a message?"

"No, this is Marv."

"I *said* you were out of the office."

I let it pass. "Let me talk to the Old Man."

"He's not here."

"Russ O'Neill, then."

"Nope."

I sighed. "Who *is* there?"

"Hawthorpe."

My spirits went down like the *Lusitania*. Hawthorpe was Continental Mutual's half-wit-in-residence; he couldn't be trusted to fill a fountain pen. But this was an emergency, so I had her put him on.

"Howdy, Marv," he said. "We've been looking for you."

"Please, this is important."

"You bet it is. Your name came up in the delinquent accounts report. Your policy lapsed last night at midnight."

"That can wait."

"No sir, Marv, you're uninsured! In these uncertain times—"

"Hawthorpe, listen, they're trying to kill me!"

"All the more reason to carry full coverage. Continental Mutual's renewal plan is priced with your budget in mind."

"Say good-night, Hawthorpe."

"Huh?"

I hung up, pondering my next move. It was midafternoon, maybe an

hour before rush traffic. Timmons was languishing on the bench where I'd left him, moaning and rubbing his forehead. Two pregnant Sicilians stood beside him. Each held a sawed-off shotgun, centered on his breastbone.

A third covered me.

"Fish in a barrel," she said, snapping the breech in place. "On three, girls. One, two—"

"Stop," said a gravelly voice. The girls looked behind me and turned pale. All three lowered their weapons in unison and said, "Yes, Mr. Dermicelli."

THE INSIDE OF KNUCKLES' LIMOUSINE WAS LIKE A NEW Orleans bawdy house. The car came factory-equipped with television, wet bar, microwave oven and more crushed velvet than the Hilton bridal suite. The ride was so smooth you could have root canal work done in the back seat.

"Make yourselves comfortable," said Knuckles off-handedly. "We'll be arriving in just a minute."

I swallowed. "Uh, where we going?"

"The marina," he said, smiling.

Knuckles looked like Mario Lanza with a skin condition. He had a thick neck, blotchy features and a scar on his chin that looked exactly like the Proctor and Gamble trademark. On his forefinger was a ring that said CLASS OF 48.

Beside him was a luscious blonde in a skin-tight black dress. Her neckline plunged so fast it made my nose bleed. It didn't take Sam Spade to figure that this was his daughter, Francine, and she wasn't real happy to be here.

I shifted in my seat. I was crammed sardine-style between Doc Timmons and Nunzio, the monstrous bodyguard, who was even uglier than I'd expected. His face looked like an open hot roast beef sandwich. I don't think he was nearly as big as the rest of us put together.

We slowed to a stop by the water's edge.

Nice day, I thought absurdly. The shoreline was dotted with tiny boats, sails rumpling in the breeze. Seagulls flitted from cabin to cabin, cawing like sideshow barkers, nabbing fishy morsels from the mild surf. Knuckles' answer to Leisure World, I thought, wondering how the world would ever get by without me.

Knuckles looked at Timmons. "Who knows about this, besides him?"

"Lots of people," Timmons insisted. "Friends. Relatives. Friends of relatives. Then there was that paper I presented to the AMA . . . "

"Smart mouth, huh?" Knuckles polished his class ring. "I never could stomach a smart mouth." He nodded curtly to Nunzio, who wrapped his hand around Timmons' throat.

"Who else knows?" Knuckles repeated.

Timmons clawed at Nunzio's fingers, struggling to speak. His face was the color of a raw turnip. "I swear . . . swear to you . . . they mixed up . . . the lab samples. I don't even . . . remember . . . what they said."

Knuckles shook his head. "Nice try, doc," he said, reaching into the pocket of his double-breasted suit. He pulled out a wadded piece of paper, uncrumpled it and thrust it in Timmons' face. It was covered with crisp lettering, with a scrawled signature at the bottom.

"Not . . . my . . . fault," Timmons gasped.

Knuckles looked at his daughter. She dabbed a tear from each eye and looked beseechingly up at him. Knuckles squared his shoulders and turned back to the squirming doctor.

"Kill him," he told Nunzio.

Nunzio's grip tightened. Something creaked in Timmon's neck. Desperately he worked his jaws and stammered. "I . . . didn't . . . "

"Still a smart mouth," Knuckles rasped, slapping the paper with his hand. "How can you say you didn't do it when it's right here in front of you, in black and white?"

"Black and white," I said, snapping my fingers. "That's it."

Knuckles took time out from his murder-in-progress to give me an icy stare. "What?"

"I know what happened. I know who did it. You've got the wrong man."

Timmons looked suddenly hopeful. Knuckles drew his brows together and snapped, "What do you mean?"

"Take another look at the report," I said.

He did. "It looks perfectly normal."

"Exactly! If this was the real report it *wouldn't* look normal."

"Kill them both," said Knuckles.

"No, listen! The doctor signs all his paperwork with an orange marker pen. Look, it's still there in his shirt pocket."

Nunzio hesitated. Knuckles reached into the doctor's coat and pulled out Timmon's orange pen. He uncapped it, inspected the tip, and drew a line across his thumb.

"What does this prove?"

"The report's a fake," I explained. "The real one says the opposite."

"But the signature is genuine! I checked it myself!"

"Of course. It's a photocopy, with a duplicate of the authentic signature. Look." I plucked the report from his grasp and spread it on my lap. It read,

TO: CUTHBERT TIMMONS, MD
RE: SAMPLE 2115J

REQUESTED TESTS: STANDARD PREGNANCY ONLY. AGGLUTINATION TEST SHOWS REFERENCED SAMPLE IS INDICATIVE OF PREGNANCY.

END OF REPORT/HAVE A NICE DAY

"What is it?" asked Knuckles, hunching forward to see. Francine and Nunzio looked also. Timmons would have looked if he could have turned his head.

"This has been altered with correction fluid," I said. "The original report read, 'SAMPLE IS *NOT* INDICATIVE OF PREGNANCY.' Our culprit blanked out the NOT and photocopied the result, since whiteout is invisible on a photocopy. But colors come out gray, so the signature gave it away." I handed it back to him. "Timmons had nothing to do with it."

Knuckles drew a sharp breath. "Who did?"

"Figure it out. Who had access to this report? Who knew you well enough to know how you'd react to it? Better still, who knew Francine well enough to grow fond of her, and want her boyfriend out of the picture?"

Everyone looked at Nunzio. Francine said, "Not you!"

Nunzio sputtered. "You don't think—"

"Call the lab," I said, lifting the car phone from its cradle. "Have them read you the report. See if they don't agree with me."

Knuckles reached into his jacket, but Nunzio was faster. The bodyguard pulled a chrome-plated automatic from his belt and backed against the door.

"Nobody moves," he snapped.

Knuckles dropped his hands impassively. Francine looked bewildered. The doctor was too busy getting his breath back to have an opinion.

"I'm displeased with you, Nunzio," said Knuckles calmly. "You've made my daughter very unhappy."

"Poor Nunzio," said Francine. She looked at him like he was a god

who'd messed in the living room. "How could you do this thing?"

"Cosimo was no good for you, Francine," said the bodyguard. "He only wanted your money and power."

She shrugged. "Are you so different?"

"I love you!" cried Nunzio. "Of course, the money and power are nice, too . . . "

"Leave us," said Knuckles. "Leave us now."

NUNZIO TURNED THE GUN ON HIM, THOUGHT BETTER OF it, and grabbed the door latch. He jumped out, slamming it behind him, looking wildly around. I caught a flash of movement in the shadow of the bait shop, saw the gleam of sun on metal—

I drove for the floor as a burst of automatic weapons fire stitched the side of the limo. The car rocked under the impact, like a liferaft in a squall, giving the shocks a workout. I lay there for the better part of a minute, wondering if I was dead, until Knuckles tapped me on the shoulder.

"Some car, huh?" he beamed, gesturing at the windows. The one nearest me was spiderwebbed with cracks and stained bright red. The car's interior was intact.

"Not a scratch," he said, patting the upholstery with obvious pride. "This car is bulletproofed with the same stuff they use for space shuttle heat shields. If they'd had these babies in Viet Nam there'd be McDonald's in Hanoi."

"That's great," I said uncertainly.

"Don't mention it, Marvin." Knuckles glanced out the window at something I couldn't see. He nodded twice. "Good thing I had a back-up team out here," he decided. "They had orders to blast anyone making a break for it. Never thought it'd be Nunzio."

Timmons sat in the corner, rubbing his throat. "Can we go home now?" he asked.

Knuckles clapped him on the shoulder paternally. "You bet, doc. Excuse the inconvenience." The car started out of the parking lot, carefully skirting Nunzio's body. Two men ran over with a body bag as we pulled away.

I sat back to enjoy the scenery. Especially Francine's cleavage. I noticed she was giving me one of those looks, you know, the kind women always give you when they're about to get you in trouble.

I sighed. She must have been a beautiful baby. ●

A black figure appeared out of the bushes, and Frankie froze. There was a long-barrelled pistol in the figure's right hand—a revolver with a silencer!

A Study In Green

by R. TUTTLE

FRANKIE PASCO STEPPED OFF THE BUS INTO A BLINDING snowstorm and stood a moment knee deep in fresh snow buttoning up his heavy overcoat and pulling his slouch hat tighter around his head as the bus drove off. A folded newspaper was sticking out of his left overcoat pocket and he was busily chewing a toothpick, a habit of his. Sometimes called the Weasel by his clientele which included most of the drug addicts of the midwest city downtown area, he did indeed resemble the aggressive little relative of the mink with his sharp features, narrow face and gleaming eyes. His furtive manner heightened the illusion.

He plowed through the snow toward the apartment house where he lived, a large, flat, two story brick building a half block from the bus stop. As usual, his thoughts were centering on Frankie Pasco—his past—present—and his future. The latter was bugging him. He was damn sick of being ignored by the Syndicate! He was pushing thousands of dollars worth of stuff a week and saw only a tiny fraction of the profits!

However, that should change soon. For the past year he had been collecting a notebook full of information about the Syndicate, information he planned to sell to the Syndicate.

His lips parted in a mirthless smile.

It should be worth a million.

Then, he would ditch Lola—ever since their marriage she had taken to liquor—and head for the good life somewhere away from this crummy city. Too bad about Lola. Fifteen years ago, they had gone to high school together and she had been a good looking chick—terrific in the back seat of a car—or a motel. But now? An old bag.

The green notebook was safely hidden in his room in the apartment. Like a fool, he had mentioned it to Lola once but—what the Hell—she was drunk most of the time anyhow. Probably wouldn't remember.

He turned down the snow covered walk toward the apartment entrance—Maui—Kona—Fiji—Bermuda—all those places he'd read about. Get away from this damn snow!

Suddenly, a black figure appeared out of the bushes in front of the building. Frankie froze in his tracks and stared at the figure. There was a long barrelled pistol in the right hand. A revolver with a silencer!

"Hey—!" he cried, holding out his hands—his last words.

The gun spoke twice and Frankie was killed instantly. Both bullets shattered his face and he dropped in the snow face down.

The figure quickly searched his pockets and then, with a curse, ran along the front of the apartment house and disappeared in the falling snow.

The falling snow gradually covered up the body of Frankie who had dared to try blackmail on the Syndicate.

THE NEXT MORNING, LOLA PASCO, ATTIRED IN A SEMI-transparent dressing gown and battling a pounding headache, heard the doorbell. She took two aspirin and studied the thin, drawn face in the bathroom mirror.

What happened to Lola Parker, the most beautiful girl in the senior class? The same question every morning and always with the same answer. She had married Frankie Pasco and had become a lush.

The doorbell rang again. She sighed.

"Okay—okay—." The voice was husky.

She walked out into the front room, lighted a cigarette and opened the door to face a stocky man in an overcoat.

The face was familiar—out of her past. High School.

"Steve Lanthum—right?" she asked. "You're a cop or something."

He nodded. "Hello, Lola—I'm a detective now. Can I come in?"

"Sure . . . Why not—I'm not exactly dressed for company." Her thin body was quite visible under the gown.

Lanthum walked in and closed the door. "Go put on a robe, Lola. I

have to talk to you about Frankie."

"Frankie—," she laughed. "He's probably asleep in his room. Steve, a couple of weeks after we got married, he decided he needed to sleep alone. I don't know anything about Frankie, Steve." Her thin face was waxen under the unruly mass of greying black hair.

"Lola," he said in level tones, "Frankie was gunned down last night sometime in front of this apartment house. He's dead."

She stared at him for an instant. "Dead? I need a drink." She went over to a cabinet, pulled out a bottle of bourbon and quickly made up a drink. After a few sips, she turned to Lanthum, seemingly composed. "Frankie was shot?" She took a thoughtful sip of the drink. "How about that—." She smiled faintly. "Since you don't like to look at my skinny body, I'll put on something. She turned and walked out of the room.

Lanthum, out of force of habit, studied the room—the usual sofa, several chairs, rug, liquor cabinet, a couple of tables, a TV . . .

She returned wearing slacks and a sweater. Her hair was gathered up in back with a red ribbon. "Better, Steve?" She sat down on the sofa. "Have a seat."

He sat down in a chair and unbuttoned his overcoat. He was partially bald with blonde hair, and had a round, pleasant face which at the moment held a grim expression. "I see there's no point in offering condolences."

"None what-so-ever," she said. "As far as I'm concerned, Frankie has been dead for fifteen years."

"Well—we think the Drug Syndicate got him. Did you know anything about his line of work?"

She shrugged. "It was illegal—I think he sold drugs—"

"Right. He was a pusher." He paused. "Now the story we get from undercover agents—narcs—is that he was unhappy with the Syndicate and had collected a mass of information about the operation that he planned to—sell to the higher ups for a large sum of money. Do you know anything about that?"

She vaguely remembered something Frankie had said about a notebook—but she shook her head. "Frankie never confided in me. Do you know who shot him?"

"It was a professional job," Lanthum said. "We are assuming that the Syndicate hired someone to get rid of him."

She finished her drink and rose to make another. "How about all this information he had?"

"I don't know," Lanthum said. "It looked as though Frankie's body had been searched but we have no way of knowing whether the

killer found anything or not."

As she poured bourbon into the glass, she began to remember. Frankie had talked about a green notebook he had hidden in his room. She added some water to the bourbon. "I wish I could help you, Steve." She returned to the sofa. "Are you going to be able to catch the killer—or will it be another of those gang killings?"

"Catching the killer will be a problem," admitted Lanthum. "But, suppose they didn't find the notebook and they come here looking for it?"

"I'll be in trouble," she said.

"I'll have an officer guard the apartment for a few days—and I'd like to have somebody from the lab search Frankie's room."

"Sure. Go ahead." Her face was thoughtful. "When will the lab man be here?"

"This afternoon."

She nodded. "Any more questions?"

He smiled. "We probably know more about Frankie than you do. Did any of his friends ever visit him here?"

"He used to bring young girls home with him for the night."

"Names?"

"I don't know—he always told me to get lost." She laughed shortly. "Back in high school, he wouldn't even let me dance with anybody at the prom."

"I danced with you once," Lanthum said.

"Yeah—and he got mad at me." She frowned. "Steve—Suzy came down here once. She just moved in about a month ago—Suzy Jones—She's young, good looking. She spent the night with Frankie, then claimed she didn't know he was married. She thought I was the maid."

"Which apartment?"

Lola pointed up toward the ceiling. "Right over this one."

"I'll talk to her."

"She's in now. I can hear her walking around. Now, if you can catch her in a nightgown—" Lola grinned.

He rose. "I don't plan to. You'll have to come down to the morgue and officially identify the body."

"No strain. I'll go down after lunch."

Lanthum eyed her for an instant. "You didn't shoot him, did you?"

"No—I'm afraid of guns—something I had in common with Frankie. He was afraid of guns too."

"He had good reason to be," Lanthum said. "I'll be back."

"Okay. See you."

He left.

She sat for several minutes contemplating her drink. She was free! A happy widow! And maybe a rich widow.

SHE SET THE HALF FINISHED DRINK ON THE END TABLE and went into her bedroom where she extracted a key from a dresser drawer. A duplicate of the key to Frankie's room—she'd had it made several years ago. She then went out into the short hallway, paused in front of Frankie's door for an instant, then inserted the key. The key worked and an instant later, she pushed the door open.

The room was immaculate—bed neatly made up—dresser and small round table clear—Frankie, for all his faults, was probably the neatest guy in the city. There was a small desk in the corner with a lamp.

Where would Frankie have hidden the notebook? Once, he had told her about hiding stuff from his parents—taped under tables, taped in back of the toilet—he had his own bathroom.

She proceeded to check under the bed, the desk, the table—finding nothing, then went into the bathroom where she ran her hand along the back of the water closet. Nothing. She took the top off the water closet and looked down into the water.

And there it was in a plastic bag next to the float.

She pulled out the bag, dried it off and opened it. There was a roll of ten dollar bills in with the notebook. She shoved notebook and money into a pocket and carefully replaced the cover.

Then, she quickly left the room, locking the door behind her.

She counted the money—one hundred dollars, put it into her purse and sat down to examine the notebook.

It was filled with addresses, people's names, amounts of drugs, financial data—all neatly printed.

The doorbell rang.

She shoved the notebook into her bra and opened the door.

"Good morning, Suzy," she said. "Come on in."

"Hi." Suzy stepped into the room. She was small, well-built with shoulder-length black hair in more or less disarray around her boyish face. She was wearing a form-fitting, green ski outfit.

"Drink?" asked Lola.

"No thanks." She paused. "A cop just came up to see me—tells me your husband was shot last night."

Lola nodded. "Yes."

Suzy smiled suddenly. "Should I say I'm sorry?"

"Don't bother."

Suzy looked thoughtfully at the floor for an instant, then eyed Lola. "Look. I happen to know that Frankie had something belonging to

some friends of mine. I'd like to look for it in his room."

Lola felt a chill streak down her spine. "What exactly is this thing?"

"A little green notebook. I want it—and I'll do anything to get it," Suzy said.

"There's a cop coming here any minute to search his room," Lola said. "I guess the police are looking for the same—notebook."

"Damn!" Suzy's face hardened. "Lousy cops!"

Lola sat down and picked up her drink. "You know—I think I know where the notebook is—and it isn't in his room."

"Where is it?" demanded Suzy.

Lola drained the glass. "Suzy, did you kill Frankie?"

"Yes—and you're gonna be next if I don't get that notebook."

"Suppose I tell the police you killed him?"

"I'd deny it and who would believe you? You're a drunk."

A good point, reflected Lola. "I assume you were paid to dispose of Frankie—probably a large amount," she said. "So, I'll give you the notebook for a price."

"Like what?"

"Half of your payment."

"Half!" sputtered Suzy, her eyes blazing with anger. "That's two hundred and fifty grand!"

"Frankie was worth a half a million to the Syndicate—dead?" asked Lola. She found herself enjoying this heated exchange of words. "I assume that the notebook is included in your contract and if you can't produce it . . . "

Suzy seemed to wilt suddenly, sinking into a chair and shaking her head slowly. "Maybe we can make a deal." Her face tensed and she glared at Lola. "But, remember this—I'm a dead shot. I would just as soon shoot you."

"I have no doubt of that," Lola said. "If you will come here tonight around seven, I'll give you the notebook—after you give me my two hundred and fifty thousand."

Suzy had calmed down somewhat and she smiled faintly at Lola. "You know something? Frankie told me once your brain was an alcoholic mush. I think he was wrong."

"Right—I was an A plus student in school."

Suzy rose. "Okay. I'll see you at seven."

The door bell rang.

"Probably the police," Lola said, rising. "You better go."

She opened the door to admit a little man who produced a police badge.

"Here to check your husband's room, Ma'am."

Suzy left and Lola took the man to Frankie's room.

THAT AFTERNOON AT FIVE, LOLA RETURNED TO HER apartment. The ordeal in the morgue hadn't been such an ordeal—Frankie had looked as though he were asleep. Still—down deep—there were a few twinges of regret. Frankie had been so—alive—vital.

Lanthum arrived at quarter of five. She had just made a pot of coffee. She offered him a cup and they sat down to sip coffee and munch cookies.

"You look a lot different," he said.

And she did—a bright, checkered skirt, white blouse and a bit of hair touch up had taken a few years off tired, drunk old Lola. Not quite the high school senior but an improvement.

"Better, I hope," she said. "I'm going to start a new life."

"How's your finances?" he asked. "Any problems."

"Actually, no different—Frankie rarely gave me money. I inherited some stocks ten years ago and left them in my name—no rich bitch but I'll be okay."

"I talked to Suzy," he said. "An interesting woman—reminds me of Miss Ashley, our high school French teacher—a beautiful ice princess."

"Do you think she's involved in Frankie's death?" asked Lola.

"I don't know," he answered. "We're checking her out—as we are everybody in the building."

"You haven't mentioned the notebook. I guess you didn't find it."

He shook his head. "Not a trace of it. Did he have a safe deposit box?"

"I don't know."

Lanthum rose. "We'll check that out." He smiled sadly. "So far, the killer remains a mystery." He drained his coffee cup. "There will be an officer in the hall."

She nodded. "You still think the killer will come here looking for the notebook?"

"A good possibility." He left.

Damn good possibility, thought Lola.

She poured herself another cup of coffee, added a shot of bourbon to the steaming liquid and sat back in the sofa. It was nice to know that Frankie wouldn't come busting in with some sneering comment about her appearance. Yes—she was grateful to Suzy. A horrible thing to say.

The telephone rang. Suzy was on the other end.

"What's that cop doing in the hall?" she demanded.

"In case the killer tries to get me," answered Lola with a slight smile. "Do you have the money?"

"Yes. This isn't a trap, is it?"

"No. Come on down with the money. The cop won't bother you."

Suzy hung up and Lola poured herself some more coffee. After a thought, she added some bourbon. All this intrigue was beginning to get to her.

She took a sip of the coffee and opened the front door. Suzy was talking to the cop down at the end of the hall. A moment later, Suzy walked toward her. They eyed each other for an instant, then went into the apartment.

Suzy was wearing tight fitting slacks and carrying a pocketbook.

Lola sat down on the sofa.

After a few seconds of silence, Suzy spoke. "I have the money." She pulled an envelope out of her pocketbook. "Two hundred and fifty thousand."

Lola pulled the green notebook out of her blouse. "I have the notebook." She held out her hand. "Can I count the money?"

Suzy nodded. "Can I see the notebook?"

They exchanged envelope for notebook. While Lola counted the stack of tens, twenties, hundreds and higher denominations, Suzy paged through the notebook.

After a few minutes, Suzy rose. "I'm going to deliver this but I'll be back." She drew out an evil looking revolver from her purse. "Now, you're in this as deep as I am."

"Could be," said Lola, still counting the money. "Just remember the cop out in the hall. He might decide to search you."

"Know something!" Anger flared in Suzy's face. "You're as stinking as your husband." She turned and left, slamming the door behind her.

"Stinkinger," murmured Lola.

THE NEXT MORNING, LANTHUM ARRIVED AT LOLA'S apartment at nine with the news that Suzy had been found, shot to death in an alley. "And we got the guy who shot her. She had a gun—the same gun that killed Frankie—and evidently put up a fight. She put a bullet into her killer's shoulder. We got him at the hospital. Syndicate man." He held up the little green notebook. "She tried to pass this off as Frankie's notebook evidently. It's got names and addresses in it but—all fakes. Looks like she shot Frankie."

Lola nodded. "Can't fool the Syndicate."

"Right. Question is—where is the real notebook?"

Lola smiled and reached into her blouse. "Here. I found it last night in a cubbyhole in the closet." She handed the notebook to Lanthum. "Go get 'em."

He took the notebook and quickly looked through it, nodding his head. "Thanks—I'll get this right down to headquarters." He flashed a smile at her and left.

The notebook cost her twenty-five cents and she got two hundred and fifty thousand for it. Somehow, she had managed to pick up some larceny from Frankie—by osmosis maybe.

She picked up the telephone and called the travel agency—a trip to Maui was in order. ●

FROM THE NOTEBOOKS OF JOHN H. WATSON, M.D.

Mrs. Hudson, the landlady of Sherlock Holmes, was a long-suffering woman. Not only was her first-floor flat invaded at all hours by throngs of singular and often undesirable characters but her remarkable lodger showed an eccentricity and irregularity in his life which must have sorely tried her patience. His incredible untidiness, his addiction to music at strange hours, his occasional revolver practice within doors, his weird and often malodorous scientific experiments, and the atmosphere of violence and danger which hung around him made him the very worst tenant in London. On the other hand, his payments were princely. I have no doubt that the house might have been purchased at the price which Holmes paid for his rooms during the years that I was with him.

The landlady stood in the deepest awe of him and never dared to interfere with him, however outrageous his proceedings might seem. She was fond of him, too, for he had a remarkable gentleness and courtesy in his dealings with women. He disliked and distrusted the sex, but he was always a chivalrous opponent.

—THE ADVENTURE OF THE DYING DETECTIVE
by A. Conan Doyle

Down below me in the street I see the senator's long, dark-blue limousine, flanked by a motorcycle cop off each wheel. I raise my rifle, fix my target in the sight, hold him there. I squeeze the trigger . . .

The Last To Know

by JOHN LUTZ

December 1988

LISTEN TO ME. *LISTEN TO ME!*

I am *not* sane! I've been here, in this *place,* long enough to know that. I'm surrounded by the insane, and they're not at all unlike me. I hear voices from the back of my head—I really do! Yesterday, in front of Dr. Loebman, I ate a cockroach. There were seven of it but it pretended to be one. When I told Dr. Loebman that, he smiled. I could kill him for that! I told him so. He doesn't believe me.

Julia will be here soon. My loving wifey. I refer to her that way all the time, but with a sneer. She *knows,* damn her! She knows I'm insane. The—

But the heat is rising in me again, spiraling out and upward from my heart. I cast the cool emanations of my thoughts upon it, thoughts that stem from the subtle vibrations pulsing from the sharpened steel in my hand behind my back. I made the instrument I hold behind me, and I am proud of it. I've always been a handy guy. It's a piece of the bed spring from my cell (they call it a room), straightened, sharpened (I'm not allowed anything sharp here, as I'm not allowed even a belt or shoestrings), on one end. It took me hours to fashion it to my fancy. It is rigid if thin, over a foot long, unnoticeable beneath my pants leg as I

walked to the visitation room with an orderly on each side of me. Oh, they'll discover that part of the bed spring is missing; they probe, probe, probe and discover everything, eventually.

But eventually won't be soon enough this time.

In a moment or a minute, the thick wooden door of the visitation room will open, and Julia will be permitted to visit me. The sturdy steel mesh that separates one side of the room from the other, one side of the world from the other, will be between us. An armed guard will be in the room, like a uniformed conscience in a clown suit. I despise uniforms.

I will smile at Julia as she maintains her charade. I will whisper to her. She will lean close to the steel mesh, the better to hear me, her eyes closed. Julia always automatically closes her eyes when someone whispers in her ear.

The glinting arc of sharpened bed spring, inserted through the steel mesh, will easily pierce her closed eyelid, pierce her brain, puncture the unreality of her lies as if it were a tenuous balloon ripe to explode.

And then the truth shall set me free.

Sane? Me?

Hah!

October 1988

THE LONG BARREL OF THE RIFLE IS LIKE THE FOREFINGER of fate, pointing to oblivion. From where I'm perched on the building roof, concealed within the air-conditioning casing, I have a fine view of the street, of the crowd, milling like detestable mindless worker ants in happy confused turmoil. I'm fifteen stories high, but as I squint through the rifle's telescopic sight my inner self and my hate and the roar of my blood rush down to street level. I might even be able to see the expression on his face at impact. The prospect excites me.

A murmur floats upward from the crowd, like the lustful breathing of a huge, many-brained thing moved by raw instinct. I sweep the sight along the thing's many heads. They are all turned toward the east and the Interstate Business Bypass, noses raised as if onto the scent, chins jutted out expectantly, eyes aglitter. Something wicked this way comes.

I hear a siren. Not wailing, merely thrusting its noise ahead of it in short bursts to clear the way. There's the first motorcycle cop. I train the telescopic sight on him, centering him in the cross-hairs, gauging speed and distance. He's traveling about fifteen miles per hour. I'll have to lead the motorcade, shoot where my target isn't but will be. Destinies converging.

The crowd begins to applaud. A police car glides past below, trailing

the lead motorcycle, its red and blue lights flashing the importance of the event. Then another police car. The department is out in full force for this one.

There's the Secret Service car that every Presidential candidate gets assigned to protect him, even Senator Gorman.

The Secret Service screened the street, screened the entire city, for the suspicious, the dangerous. But they missed me; I posed no apparent threat. They still don't know about me. This is my delicious secret.

Since mid-summer there has been no air-conditioning unit inside the steel case that shields me from view. I checked it out, carefully, a week ago. I didn't want some repairman making an unexpected call. But I knew there'd be no rush to replace an air conditioner in October. I'm sane enough to be sure of that.

And there's the senator's long, dark-blue limousine, flanked by a motorcycle cop off each wheel, keeping perfect pace with the car, their sirens silent but their lights flashing. I can see the senator seated in the rear of the limousine. His window is rolled down. He is waving and smiling his way into the hearts and minds of the voters.

"The oath has been violated!" I scream through clenched teeth. I raise the rifle. I fix my target in the sight, hold him there. Then I lead him carefully, my heartbeats marking the seconds. I squeeze the trigger like the Army instructed me years ago. Like squeezing a lemon.

Below me, the street erupts into terror.

Of course I didn't expect to escape. I didn't even formulate an escape plan. That would be the act of a rational man, which I am not.

JULIA BEFORE THE GRAND JURY. BLUE EYES BRIMMING with tears of compassion, breast trembling. (I wasn't actually there, but I saw her nonetheless. After all, we've been married fifteen years.) She had her skirt hiked up just enough so that her shapely legs couldn't be ignored.

"Our marriage was perfect," she said. "I had no idea Gregory would do something like this. Of course, he raved about politics at home. Seldom mentioned them anywhere else. You might say he's a closet intellectual. He has [sniff! sniff!] a social conscience. Gregory really cares about people, but he thought I was the only one who'd listen to him. My husband is not an evil man. I can't believe he's done this terrible thing."

That Julia! She acted in college, you know. Has a drama degree. *Summa cum laude.* That Julia!

Julia before the news media. Blue eyes brimming with tears of compassion, breast trembling. "I feel that this is a tragedy not just for my

husband and me." (I heard this on the radio in my mind; I know it took place.) "My heart reaches out to the family of the policeman who was killed, Officer . . . Kominski. I only hope that his widow can understand, and someday, perhaps, forgive my husband. He would not have done what he did if he didn't believe that the end justified the means. I'm sure he knows better now. And I only hope that Senator Gorman will someday find a way to forgive the man who tried to kill him and, mercifully, failed."

That Julia!

I'm the only one who knows the real Julia, Cruel Julia. Inflicting suffering is as natural to her as it is to a cat toying with a doomed mouse. The sadistic child never died in Julia. I actually saw her slowly pulling the wings from a fly one day; I actually saw that. I wonder what exactly was her relationship with Kominski.

December 1988

THE DOOR TO THE VISITATION ROOM IS OPENING.

Julia enters, nods smiling to the guard, broadens her smile for me, and sits down in the chair on the other side of the thick steel mesh. Shadows writhe on her features.

The solemn-faced guard is listening, paid to inform; Julia knows that. "How have you been, Gregory?" she asks.

I don't answer, but I return her smile. She frowns slightly.

"You are thoroughly evil," I tell her.

Reassured, she says, "I can forgive you for what you did, Gregory," confident that I know she means the opposite of what she's saying. She goes on, twisting the irony in the wound: "Be patient, Gregory. Someday they'll release you and we'll be together again."

She knows they never parole political assassins. The authorities regard me as legally insane—though I'm certain the good Dr. Loebman believes that I am faking my illness—but that will be a verdict the news media will never reach. So I can never be regarded as sufficiently cured to live outside these walls. Ironic, eh? One has to *be* insane in order to be cured. And political assassins are never quite regarded as genuinely mad, but forever they are regarded as dangerous. Forever.

But the act of a jealous husband, temporarily unbalanced by grief, anger, and humiliation, who kills his wife's secret lover, that is something else altogether. People, the establishment, understand that, have a grasp of the crime. They forgive. Eventually, they release wronged, jealous husbands who have killed in righteous wrath.

Julia's affair with Walter Kominski was a secret one. Even Komin-

ski's wife never suspected. Only by chance did I discover that an attempt by Julia to escape payment of a dozen parking violations led to romance and adultery. She hadn't destroyed the parking tickets soon enough, all in her dresser drawer, all bearing Officer Kominski's signature. And she hadn't yet mailed her letter to Kominski, addressed not to his home but to a post office box. I actually blushed when I read that letter. But I put it back in the drawer, put everything back the way I'd found it. And when Julia drove to meet Kominski at the motel, I followed. I watched. I saw what they did.

It wasn't Senator Gorman I was aiming at that day in October; it was Officer Walter Kominski on his motorcycle escorting the motorcade.

I wanted to be caught. I wanted to kill Kominski in a way that would reap the most publicity possible, so that Julia's shame would be paraded in front of the world.

BUT NO ONE WILL BELIEVE I HIT MY TARGET. THEY ARE convinced I was trying to kill Senator Gorman and failed. Cruel Julia has added to the misconception, punishing me. As there is nothing to link Julia to Kominski, so there is nothing to link Kominski to me. Unless someone believes me when I tell them of my wife's affair with Kominski, I had no apparent motive to kill this imperfect stranger.

And of course no one believes me. They think I am a cunningly sane political assassin, and that I am feigning insanity to avoid prison life.

"Move closer, Julia," I say through the steel mesh, lowering my voice. "I have something important to tell you."

"Not on your life, Gregory." She smiles her beautiful smile, knowing the guard is watching, listening. "There are no secrets between us, darling."

But she slowly does lean forward, not very far, taunting me. Yet if she comes just slightly closer . . .

There are sounds of movement outside in the hall, scuff of sole on tile floor. The guard glances through the tiny window in the door, then motions Julia outside.

She stands up. She smiles again, not kindly, knowing the guard can't see her face. "No secrets, darling," she repeats. She winks at me. She is capable of unlimited cruelty, to me especially.

She walks out of the room, leaving me here.

The door doesn't close all the way. Dr. Loebman and two more guards push their way in. One of the guards unlocks and opens the gate in the steel mesh barrier, and they crowd into my side of the room. The guards' weapons are drawn and ready, an instant away from spitting lead nuggets of death. These men know that I am armed with honed

steel.

"A piece of metal from your bed springs is missing," Dr. Loebman says calmly, staying well behind the stoic but nervous armed guards. "We know you have it, Gregory. Please give it to us. Be reasonable, as I know you can be."

Reasonable? The fools! This is my one chance to escape!

May 2019

JULIA LIFTED A BROWN-SPOTTED HAND TO HER TREMbling chin. She was smiling at what she heard on the evening newscast.

"Gregory Martin, the man who attempted to assassinate President Gorman in Nineteen eighty-eight during the presidential campaign, finally died today as the result of gunshot wounds suffered that same year in an escape attempt. When doctors pronounced that he would never be able to move, or even speak, for the rest of his life, he was released in the custody of his wife Julia, who has lovingly cared for him all these years . . ." ●

MURDEROUS ATTACK UPON SHERLOCK HOLMES

We learn with regret that Mr. Sherlock Holmes, the well-known private detective, was the victim this morning of a murderous asssault which has left him in a precarious position. There are no exact details to hand, but the event seems to have occurred about twelve o'clock in Regent Street, outside the Cafe Royal. The attack was made by two men armed with sticks, and Mr. Holmes was beaten about the head and body, receiving injuries which the doctors describe as most serious. He was carried to Charing Cross Hospital and afterwards insisted upon being taken to his rooms in Baker Street. The miscreants who attacked him appear to have been respectably dressed men, who escaped from the bystanders by passing through the Cafe Royal and out into Glasshouse Street behind it. No doubt they belonged to that criminal fraternity which has so often had occasion to bewail the activity and ingenuity of the injured man.

—The Adventure of the Illustrious Client

Did the treasure really exist? If it did, he was determined to find it!

The Mislaid Treasure of Dancing Bare

by STEVE LINDLEY

TO A MAN IN NEED OF A DRINK, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN just another roadside bar, a little dirtier than most, but to Sam Cotter it was the first stop on his own personal heritage trail, which was becoming more personal by the minute as Melissa and the kids were getting sick of looking out the car windows at nothing but desert.

That was one of the reasons he left them across the street at the gas station's soda machine. The other was that Melissa had warned him that if he mentioned the treasure one more time she was going to nail his tongue to the dashboard, and there was no way he was about to leave Burnt Water, Arizona without inquiring about the treasure. After three generations of stories by the fireplace and weekend tongue-in-cheek house-hunting parties, it was time to find out if it really did exist.

The bar's interior did not disappoint Cotter. The floor was dusty, the wood was raw, and one of the two customers at the bar rail looked like an Indian. He had never seen a real, live Indian before, and since this man wasn't wearing feathers, he put it down as a tribute to the Cotter ancestry that he was able to recognize him as one. He brushed off his stiff, new jean jacket, sat down one stool to the Indian's right, and ordered a whiskey because he felt he had to.

"Desert sure makes a man thirsty," Cotter blurted, a little carried away with the magic of the moment.

"Pardon?" the bartender asked, serving the drink.

"You know. The heat." Cotter gave that a chance to sink in. "Makes you sweat." Still no connection. "You sweat, you get thirsty."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess you do, at that." The bartender took the money for the drink and turned to the register, leaving Cotter very much alone.

"Sweat." The voice came from the Indian. "The sun takes from us what the clouds give. It's good for a man to sweat. Makes him one with nature."

"There he goes again," the second customer, a few stools to Cotter's right said to the wall in front of him. He had a small nose squashed onto a big face and he sported Yasir Arafat's beard. "Whitey, you get a few beers in you, you talk just like an Indian."

"I *am* an Indian, you ass," the Indian muttered into his bottle of Schlitz.

"Well," Cotter interrupted, feeling a little like a tennis net. "You folks live around here, or you just stopping in off the highway?"

THE BEARDED MAN REACTED WITH THE ENTHUSIASM OF one who is generally ignored. "Born and bred right here in Burnt Water," he answered, sitting back on the stool with more pride than that revelation deserved. Inbred more likely, Cotter thought. "Name's Jeffrey Mudd. Indian over there is Whitey. Don't pay any attention to him. When he's sober he talks just like you and me. Well, not quite like you; you don't sound like you're from Arizona."

"No. No, I'm from Chicago."

"Chee-co-goo," the Indian corrected softly to his beer.

"Chicago, huh? Pretty long trip to go alone. Business?"

"Oh, no," Cotter said after ordering a side of soda water, pleased to have breached communication with the natives. "The wife and kids are with the car across the street. We came to see the site of the Battle of Wide Ruin Wash. One of my ancestors actually fought in it. I imagine you've heard of him. He—"

Cotter had lost his audience. Mudd was already at the window, his hands cupped against the glass.

"That her between the gas pumps?" he asked. "Looks like she's doling out candy or something from the back end of a station wagon?"

"That must be her. She's not really all that crazy about coming out here, but I traded her the Bahamas last year for this trip."

"Well, I must say she's a good looking woman."

"Thank you." Cotter smiled. Better than what you grow around these parts, eh, Mudd?

"Wish I could say the same for the kids, though."

"I beg your pardon?"

Mudd squinted at Cotter, then back out the window. "They got some kind of disease? What's the matter with their hair?"

"Their—? Oh." Cotter laughed. "That's just their wigs."

"Wigs?" Mudd looked disgusted. "Your kids wear wigs?"

"They're little girls. They play."

Mudd muttered something about the virtues of raising children in Arizona. "Pretty ratty looking wigs."

"Well, of course they are. They're just for play, old junk, from the attic. What's the problem, anyway? What's the big deal about my kids' toys?"

The Indian laughed. Mudd and the bartender stared as though they had never heard him laugh.

"You travel fifteen hundred miles to talk about wigs?"

"I'm not—" Cotter turned and snapped, suddenly feeling attacked on both flanks. "No. I told you why I came here."

"Yes. To see Wide Ruin Wash."

"That's right. My great-grandfather just happened to have led the battle there, for your information."

THE SCHLITZ BOTTLE FELL ONTO THE BAR WITH A DEAD thud. By the time Cotter could react his sleeve was wet and the Indian was on his feet, standing over him. Cotter braced his shoulders.

"Are you speaking," the Indian said between his teeth, "of Harrison J. Cotter?"

Cotter turned to Mudd and the bartender for support, but they only stood breathing through their mouths. This was hardly the handshakes-all-around reaction he had expected.

"Y—yes, I am. I'm Sam Cotter."

"Sam Cotter. I've waited many tears for you to come home, Sam Cotter. Waited to take from you what is mine."

"Look, friend, I don't even know you. I'm from Chicago—"

The bartender took the Indian's arm and said something to him Cotter couldn't hear. Then he gave him a fresh beer. Mudd, seeing everything was safe, came over by Cotter. Cotter ordered another drink.

"Don't pay any attention to him," Mudd said. "Him and his damn ancestry."

"My damned ancestry?" the Indian bristled. "*My* great-grandfather was not a thieving scum."

"Now, just hold on there," Cotter said, the whiskey beginning to work its magic on him. "Are you inferring mine was?"

The Indian snorted. "Let history speak for us."

"Yes, let's. Harrison J. Cotter was a general in the union army. He was no thief." Cotter thought a moment, remembering why he came to Burnt Water in the first place: the treasure.

"You said before that you wanted to take back what's rightfully yours. What were you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"You're talking about the treasure of Harrison Cotter!"

"No, I'm speaking of the treasure of Dancing Bare!"

Cotter took another gulp from his drink. This was like poking at a vat of nitroglycerin. "I've heard of him. Is he one of your ancestors?"

"I am Running Whiteankles, great-grandson of Chief Dancing Bare, named for his father who stripped off his clothes and danced around the fire on the day his first son was born."

"I always figured you came from a long line of weirdos, Whitey," Mudd interjected.

Whiteankles ignored him. "Dancing Bare led the Navajo into Wide Ruin Wash to fight against your great-grandfather. Of course, my tribe was outnumbered, but that never stopped the Navajo." He turned back to his beer and sobered a moment. "Sure stopped them that time, though. And when my people were slaughtered, Harrison J. Cotter and his troops looted their proud corpses."

"That's not the way I heard it, Whiteankles. That's not how I heard it at all. The Indians stole from my family in small raids. One of the reasons Harrison Cotter went into Wide Ruin Wash in the first place

was to take back from the Indians what belonged to my family."

"So he did."

"Well, doesn't that make your great-grandfather the thief? He stole from my family first."

Everyone was silent, waiting for Whiteankles to respond. Mudd and the bartender had been listening intently since they heard the mention of a treasure.

"I will give you this, Sam Cotter. If it happened today, yes, I might have to agree. But what do you know of Arizona a hundred years before this." He waved his arm around the bar and sneered, giving an extra wave in Mudd's direction, much to Mudd's chagrin. "As we, in small tribes, were driven farther and farther into nonexistence by a great, moving arsenal of white men, we fought back the only way we knew. We raided single caravans, isolated camps, trying to hold what ground we could. It was during these raids that Chief Dancing Bare acquired his trophies."

"Trophies? Hah! You mean my family's wealth."

Whiteankles laughed. Cotter licked his lips and leaned closer to the Indian.

"Listen, Whiteankles, I don't know where this treasure is. Nobody does. Now, there may be some bad blood between us, but what can we do about that? And if this treasure really does exist someplace, maybe with your help—"

"It exists. You have it."

"Will you stop saying that? How do you know so damned well I've got it?"

Whiteankles straightened up slowly and pointed at Mudd. "He told me."

"Now hold on, Whitey," Mudd protested. "Don't go dragging me into this."

Cotter raised one eyebrow. "Is that true, Mudd?"

"Listen, Mr. Cotter, I never even heard about any treasure until you guys here started arguing about it. You just got a drunk Indian on your hands is all."

"You have it, Cotter," Whiteankles said. "You brought it here with you. You just don't know how to identify it."

"And you do!"

"And I do."

"So, identify it! Tell me where it is and half of it is yours. I give you my word. Is it here? Here in the bar? It's in my car. How did it get in the car? Are you listening to me? I'm willing to forget what happened in the past if you are."

"What happened in the past," Whiteankles said slowly, "is past."

Mudd coughed into his drink. "That's deep, Whitey."

"As I said, things were different then. Treasures. Hah! Today, I don't know if Harrison J. Cotter would bother to steal them back. Men are not what they were. In fact, I'm not even sure I want them now."

Cotter's eyes turned into slits. "You don't want any of the treasure?"

"I have no need of my great-grandfather's trophies."

"All right, the trophies. Well, I'm a working man, Whiteankles. I support a family. I have a little more to do than just sit around and drink all day. Maybe I can make a little use of the trophies."

"The battle trophies."

"The battle trophies! Yes!"

"Do you know anything of the Navajo trophies of battle, Sam Cotter? Do you know what they took?"

"How the hell should I know? Gold. I don't know."

"No, not gold."

Cotter rubbed his chin. "Beads? What?"

"No, not beads."

COTTER TURNED BACK TO HIS DRINK, EXASPERATED. Trophies, indeed. This entire business was getting ridiculous. Here he was playing fool to a drunk Indian, and why? Because he hoped to solve an old family riddle. Find a treasure of what? Family heirlooms? Something to pass down to the kids. Something to—

Mudd was about to say something when the color left Cotter's face. Cotter took a gulp from his drink, then choked on it. Then he stood with his hand over his mouth and ran out of the bar.

"Holy Jesus," Mudd exclaimed, running to the window. Tires squealed, the sound so loud inside the bar that the bartender braced himself against the sink. Mudd turned back away from the window.

"Did you see that? That man just went out of his mind, took out of here like—and he was tearing the hair right off his childrens' heads, tearing at their heads like a rabid cat. Whitey, what did you say to him?"

The Indian finished off his Schlitz and wiped his mouth with his shirt cuff. "Mudd," he finally said. "Tell me. Once Mr. Cotter wrestled the treasure off his children, did he take it with him? Or did he leave it here on the ground for me?" ●

The old man just wanted to be left alone with his memories, but the punk wouldn't let him. Wasn't there anything a person could do about it?

The Children

by P.S. AHNEN

THEY STARTED CALLING HIM "WEIRDO" ONE DAY WHEN the old man stumbled in the produce department of the Giant Super Market and toppled a pyramid of oranges. They rolled down the aisle, trapping carts and customers and filling the air with the pungent, sweet smell of the fruit. Jackson, the store manager, scrambled to round up the oranges and then helped the old man. While Jackson walked the old man to the door, the produce clerk managed to rebuild the pyramid of oranges. A crowd of shoppers had gathered around the old man. A tall youth in the crowd said, "Way to go, weirdo!" His full lips curled into a sneer.

The old man stunned, turned to Jackson and said, "Why he call me weird? Because I fall? I no weird."

"Don't pay any attention to that punk, he doesn't know better," said Jackson. "You sure you're all right? If you ain't I'll get a stock boy to walk you home."

"I fine," said the old man.

BEFORE HE GOT THAT NAME "WEIRDO" HE HAD BEEN merely the old man on the block, and before that, old man Witkowski, and before that Mr. Witkowski. He lived in the neighborhood bordered by Chene Street and Joseph Campau Avenue on the east side of Detroit. He and Mrs. Witkowski (yes, there had been a Mrs. Witkowski, but she had been dead three years) lived in a frame house on Joseph Campau. He had worked at Dodge Main since 1930. In 1971

when he was sixty-five they gave him a gold watch and a retirement party.

Mr. Witkowski was twenty-six years old and his wife, Vanda, 20, when they bought the neat, white frame house in 1932. It was during the great depression, but thank God, he had managed to save a small nest egg and with Vanda's dowry they were able to put a down payment. At that time, the neighborhood they lived in was very nice, filled with friendly people, many like them, from the old country. Young maples and elms lined the street like toy soldiers, and pocket size front lawns, with weed-free marion blue, framed every house. Down the corner was the Smith Grocery, with Mr. and Mrs. Smith running it. Their son, Tommy, delivered orders promptly to your back door. That was the way it had been.

Then the trees grew too big and got in the way of power lines and their roots found their way into sewers. So they were cut down by the city. And about that time the houses in the neighborhood began to be subdivided into housekeeping units. There were "room to let" signs in dirty windows.

Old cars, pick-ups and motorcycles were parked on the now weedy front patches. There was even talk that General Motors was interested in the land and might tear down the houses and build a new factory. Dodge Main had been closed for several years. St. Joseph's Church, where the sermons were said in Polish, was down the block. That's where Vanda's funeral mass was read.

All that was left of Vanda now in the cluttered little white house were the bone china cups and saucers. They were locked up in the china cabinet in the dining room. The cabinet was the only piece of furniture that Mr. Witkowski dusted. In the cabinet were the Royal Doulton rose pattern cups and saucers. Vanda had bought these on sale in the fine china section of J. L. Hudson's, in downtown Detroit.

One day, Mr. Witkowski and Vanda even went to Windsor, Canada, and purchased eight cups and saucers in a lilac pattern. They were English bone china. These were Vanda's favorites. She often said that her cups and saucers were her babies. She took care of them like so many loving children.

And it was the china, and an apple tree she had planted many years ago, that kept her going when she got sick. Even when she was too ill to eat, she managed to sit on the back porch, sipping her tea from the china cup, often in the lilac pattern. She'd rock in the old rocker and watch her husband pick the best applies and arrange them in a wicker basket near the rocker. That's also when that teenager started jumping the fence to steal the applies from the basket.

Mr. Witkowski's face would turn red. "What's this world coming to?" he would ask Vanda. "This is our house, our yard, why he run through it, steal our apples?"

"He's just a boy, let him have the apples, we have plenty," Vanda would say.

But when she died, Mr. Witkowski built a higher fence. His Vanda was dead. She had been good, kind, sweet; why did she die and that young punk live? He needed his Vanda. And then he remembered when he met her for the first time.

IT WAS IN THE SMALL VILLAGE OUTSIDE OF WARSAW. SHE was working in the fields. From the very first moment he saw her, a slim sixteen-year old, he knew she was for him. He courted her for two years, and in 1929 her father gave them a small wedding and Mr. Witkowski received a modest dowry. They sailed for America in steerage class. Through a friend in Detroit, he got a job on the assembly line at Dodge Main.

Later he was promoted. He became a crane operator. He liked that job very much. He felt free, confident high above the others, swinging a piece of iron ore or a scoop of machinery from one place to the other, always in control. Was he losing control at seventy-seven?

As a young man, and even into middle age, he had been powerfully built. It was only after Vanda died, that he became bent, listless, forgot to eat. He worried about the boy, not only stealing his apples but breaking into his house.

IT WAS ALSO ABOUT THIS TIME THAT THE SMITH GROCERY closed. Old man Smith couldn't beat the competition. The Giant Super Market was taking all his customers. And Tommy, who was called Tom now, was divorced and decided to go to California. The neighborhood changed even more; pizza places, pool halls, video game arcades and loan offices sprang up around the boarded-up stores.

After the Smith Grocery shut down, the Giant Super Market expanded, began accepting food stamps and became a surplus food outlet for the poor. Some of the old people died, others moved into senior citizens' homes. Those who could afford it moved to Florida. Mr. and Mrs. Smith had sold their house and bought a mobile home in St. Petersburg, Florida. They were packing to move.

"They're old," Mr. Witkowski said to himself, as he walked down the street to say goodbye to them. He didn't think of himself as old.

"Me still young in here," he said, pointing to his head and heart.

"Strong like a bull, like my grandpapa, he was old but strong and

marched on foot through Warsaw, chasing the Prussians out of Poland. Me, like him, strong!"

He was mumbling to himself as he passed the video arcade.

"Listen to that weird old man, talking to himself," said the tall teenager, sporting a new curly hairdo. He lounged with another youth in front of the arcade.

"No talk like that," scolded Mr. Witkowski.

"Go to hell, you weirdo!" said the youth.

Mr. Witkowski stopped mumbling and quickened his steps. When he reached Smith's house, he saw Smith sitting on the porch. After walking up the steps, he looked at his friend for the first time and said, "What happened, your eye black, your face cut?"

"Not so loud," Smith whispered. "Sit down, Witkowski, and I'll tell you." Nervously he glanced around him before he continued. "I was walking to the bank yesterday, wanted to close out my account, get traveler's checks, you know, for the move to Florida?"

Mr. Witkowski nodded. "Same boy hit you that steals my apples?"

"No, this one had blond hair and the start of a beard, greasy looking kid, tall, skinny. And he smelled funny, must have been on something, dope, you know. All I know was that he grabbed for my wallet. I keep it here in my back pocket, had one hundred bucks in it, and then *Whammo,* he gave me a karate kick, right in the face. I can tell you it's still sore." He put his hand to his face, felt it gently. "Well, I was lucky, because he could have got me *after* I'd gone to the bank. God, I can't wait to get out of this rotten neighborhood, can't wait!"

"Did you tell police?"

"Hell, no! That punk would probably bomb the house and kill the missus and me. No, I just went to the doc and got patched up, and then went to the bank, got the traveler's checks, took care of business and thank God, got home okay."

"You all right now?"

Smith nodded. "We're leaving this afternoon, and none too soon. Did you hear what happened to Mrs. DeAngelo? Some kids mugged her, broke her arm, smashed her face. She's got a concussion. They stole her purse. She only had $1.75. She's at Detroit General now. They say she'll be all right in a few months. And the kids were maybe eleven, twelve years old, three of them.

"Where are the police?"

"That's a good question. They said Mrs. DeAngelo's description could fit anyone. They warned her to stay indoors at night. But it was noon, broad daylight, and it was day when that punk hit me."

Mr. Witkowski just shook his head.

THAT AFTERNOON THE SMITHS LEFT FOR FLORIDA. A week later while Mr. Witkowski was sitting on this back porch reading a post card from them, the tall youth climbed the high fence, grabbed some apples from the basket on the porch and fled.

Mr. Witkowski raised a fist at him and yelled, "Get off my property; I call police!"

"Stick it, you weirdo," the youth said, racing out of the yard.

Soon after, the boy started throwing stones at Mr. Witkowski when he walked to the store or went to St. Joseph's for mass. One day a stone hit Mr. Witkowski on the head, cracking the skin, making an ugly red welt. That's when he went to the police station, the anger in him making him tremble.

"Yes," he said as he approached the sergeant's desk. "I know kid, he tall, have hair curly, you know," he said, holding both hands high above his head.

"You must mean a perm, well half of the guys have perms now," said Sergeant Murphy, chewing on his pencil. "Want to sign a complaint?"

"No, no sign, forget it," said Mr. Witkowski, and walked out, shaking his head, his face turning red.

AND TWO WEEKS LATER A CEMENT BLOCK WAS THROWN through Mr. Witkowski's front window and it crashed through the house. It landed in the china cabinet, breaking most of the bone china cups and saucers.

"How good his aim," Mr. Witkowski cried.

All of Vanda's cups and saucers broken, his babies killed, by that animal! He wept as he picked up the pieces. Were they all broken? No, he found a lilac cup and then a willow saucer. With tender care he washed the two pieces and wrapped them in Vanda's fine napkins. That very same day he had the front window boarded up and iron bars put on the remaining windows and doors.

Again he went to the police.

"Sorry, Mr. Witkowski, no witnesses, no evidence, and no fingerprints on the cement block. I'll file a report, however, vandalism, and call you if we hear anything," said Sergeant Murphy. "Keep your doors locked, Mr. Witkowski, and stay at home," the sergeant warned. "These kids are tough, but someday they'll trip themselves up and we'll catch them."

So Mr. Witkowski stayed home, and since the weather was pleasant and warm, he sat on his back porch and drank tea from the lilac cup and thought about Vanda. Sometimes he would pick apples and

arrange them in the wicker basket. This was his home, his porch, his yard, his apple tree. He had a right!

How fast the youth jumped the fence as though he had practiced for weeks, his long legs flying, a sweatband holding his curls. He raced to Mr. Witkowski, shoved him, knocked him down. The lilac cup and the willow saucer in Mr. Witkowski's hand trembled for an instant and then fell, shattering into a million pieces.

The young tough grabbed the lone apple from the wicker basket and ran out of the yard.

"You really are a weirdo!" he cried, his full lips curled into a sneer.

Mr. Witkowski cried out, but no one heard him. Then he dropped to his knees, confused, crushed. His brain raced, whirled. He had to find the pieces; this was the last of his children. His faded eyes, behind shaggy white eyebrows, searched the ground. He found a piece of lilac cup and held it close to him and wept. The sound of the boy's words, "You really are a weirdo!" rang in his ears. Then he slumped forward, his face turning blue, his mouth twisted and his eyes open wide, gaping.

JACKSON FOUND HIM AN HOUR LATER, WHILE WALKING home from the super market. As he passed Mr. Witkowski's house, he saw a leg sticking out of the gate.

"A stroke," said the doctor. After making arrangements to admit Mr. Witkowski into Detroit General, Jackson walked home. He saw Sergeant Murphy on the front porch of Mr. Witkowski's house.

"Say, do you know if Mr. Witkowski's home?" asked the sergeant.

"Why, what's the problem?"

"Just got a report in. Remember that tall punk, the one that was harassing Mr. Witkowski?"

"Yes," said Jackson, "what about him?"

"Well, they found him dead in an alley, poisoned. Something he ate." ●

Pearl S. Ahnen (*The Children*):

Briefly my background is in journalism. I attended Wayne State University with graduate work at the University of Michigan (in creative writing). I'm a former editor of a group of weekly newspapers in the suburbs of Detroit. Four years ago I went free lance. I served as Michigan correspondent for *Editor and Publisher* Magazine, a national publication.

I charged into the middle of the room like some idiot knight. Something smashed into the side of my head. I went reeling into the wall. A second blow to the back of my neck sent me to my knees . . .

My Lawyers Are Smith & Wesson

by DAN J. MARLOWE

THE BRIDGE FROM EL PASO THAT CROSSES THE RIO Grande ends up in Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. The main street, Avenida Juarez, is a night-time neon-lit circus of souvenir shops, fourth-class restaurants, fly-specked taverns, and sidewalk vendors selling everything from trained fleas to guaranteed aphrodisiacs.

The crowds surging along its dirty side streets are made up of conventioneers from El Paso hotels, servicemen from the nearby airbase, technicians from the Army missile training center, pimps and steerers from the cheap brothel-bars, and smugglers like me.

I entered a steak house called Palacio de Caesar and sat down at a table facing the entrance. A girl squirmed her way through the dissolute-looking loungers clustered near the unisex facility and came directly toward my table.

She was young, blonde, neat and trim, completely feminine, very easy on the eyes. Her long hair seemed to bounce on the shoulders of her white linen dress as she hurried to my corner. In that place she looked like a rainbow where there was no rain.

"Mr. Stark!" she said when she reached me. I had never seen her before, but it wasn't a question.

I wondered who had given her my name. South of the border there weren't too many who knew it. I pulled out a chair for her, and she sat down. "What can you do for me?" I asked her, giving her my best smile.

The twist in my question confused her for a moment. She had to back up whatever it was she had intended to say to me and start over again, which probably meant it was a lie. "I have a—a proposition to make to you," she said finally.

"Usually I prefer to make my own," I told her. "In your case, though, I'm willing to make an exception."

Her overall appearance had me half-expecting a blush from her, even though blushing is as old-fashioned as unpolluted rivers. She smiled automatically at the sally, but her expression didn't change. Especially her eyes didn't change. They were blue. They also didn't go with the rest of her beautiful face. This young lady might not be a whore, I decided, but her eyes said she hadn't come from a candy store.

"Let me order dinner for you," I said.

"We've no time for that, Mr. Stark."

"You may not have time, but I have time. It's why I'm here." I beckoned to Senora Gomez at the cash register. She waddled over to our table. "For two, Mamacita," I said. "*Pollo pibil* and *mole de olla.* A *jalapenas* sauce as well as a *tomatillo.*"

Senora Gomez disappeared into the kitchen. Her muu-muu floated around her ankles and when she moved she gave the impression of skating. "No taco-tortilla-refried beans here," I explained. "Mamacita cooks south of Mexico. *Pollo pibil* is chicken marinated in a peppery sauce and wrapped in banana leaves. *Mole de olla* is a thick stew made from three meats and squash flowers."

"I really don't have time—"

"You've got to eat anyway," I pointed out. "Enjoy a really good meal and then we can exchange the usual lies of two strangers meeting in a foreign country."

Her blue eyes were studying me. "You're more cynical than the average man, Mr. Stark."

"I'll give you a chance at the first lie," I told her. "Who are you?"

"I'm Jean Westmore," she said. "My father was Judge Westmore."

It didn't ring a bell; it rang a gong. "You're the one who took the full page ad in the El Paso and Juarez newspapers?"

"I'm the one who offered a fifty thousand dollar reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of my father's murderer." She said it calmly.

OLD JUDGE WESTMORE HAD BEEN A HANGING JUDGE. HE had a well-honed reputation for incorruptibility. He had presided at the notorious slant-well trials in Midland and Odessa. The operators who had been angling their shafts into the productive pools of oil under their neighbors' land had offered the judge a seven-figure bribe, only to learn that their poor judgement of his character had earned them a few extra years in Huntsville.

More recently, Westmore had been on the bench when a land scandal made headlines in El Paso. A Mexican speculator named Tom Costanza was accused of acquiring land from the city for a fraction of its value, aided and abetted by a few crooked city officials, and then selling the same land parcels back to the city at a huge profit.

It had been a long, complicated trial. During a recess Judge Westmore had gone down into Old Mexico with a group from a lawyers' convention. He became separated from them somehow and wasn't seen again until his body was discovered, surprisingly, beside the dusty highway to White Sands, New Mexico.

The body had half a dozen .45 caliber slugs in it, which at least accounted for its condition if not how it had got back into the U.S. Then a key witness disappeared while a new trial was being convened, and Tom Costanza walked.

"The fact that you're Judge Westmore's daughter doesn't explain what you're doing in this unhealthy part of the world," I said. Something was nibbling at the edges of my memory. Hadn't Judge Westmore been a life-long bachelor?

"I *know* who killed my father," the self-proclaimed Jean Westmore said. "I want you to get him across the border for me and make him admit he was paid by Tom Costanza." She waited but I said nothing. "I'll pay," she added.

"Naturally. But why not tell me the source of your information and how you happened to come to me?"

"My father was killed here in Mexico by a man nicknamed El Cuchillo," she said.

It was hardly a direct answer. "El Cuchillo," I repeated. "The Knife. What else do you know?"

"I know what he looks like. He's six-feet-two, a hundred ninety

pounds, and he has a four-inch knife scar on his right cheek. And I know he'll be at the cemetery south of town tomorrow morning."

"That's detailed information. But how do you know all this?"

"Because his parents are buried there, and tomorrow is *El Dia de los Muertos,* the Day of the Dead when all Mexicans honor their dead by having family picnics alongside the graves."

"Who told you that El Cuchillo will be there?"

"A man is claiming the reward I offered," she said after a second's hesitation. "I can't tell you who it is, because I promised I wouldn't. But I'm positive he knows what he's talking about."

"Perhaps, but I don't see my picture in your jigsaw puzzle."

"The same man sent me to a lawyer, Abogado Feliz, who suggested I hire you. He said that Mexico doesn't like to turn its nationals over to U.S. courts. He also said you're smart enough and tough enough to get El Cuchillo across the border for me."

I'd never been hijacked during any of my business ventures, which might make me smart, and the few who'd tried it hadn't found it habit-forming, which might make me tough, but not even for a girl as attractive as Jean Westmore am I ever wholly comfortable on the side of the angels. Perhaps especially with Jean Westmore, I decided. Also, although I knew Abogado Feliz, there was no reason he should do me any favors. Mexicans strongly tend to hand out jobs to relatives.

"What's in it for me?" I asked.

"Ten thousand dollars." She seemed comfortable with the direction of the conversation.

"Fifteen," I bargained automatically.

"With five in advance," she said. She opened her handbag and removed a thick pad of hundred dollar bills. Even a quick glimpse at the contents of the handbag disclosed that this was a girl who believed in a full picnic basket.

I slipped the five grand into a jacket pocket. "Where are you staying, Jean?"

"At the Hotel Rosado." She correctly interpreted the expression on my face. "Is it really that bad?"

"It's a dump. Does your informant know where you're staying?" She hesitated. "Ahh, I see. He suggested it, perhaps?"

"Yes. But—"

"Don't worry. The beneficence of your advance to me entitles you to my services as a bodyguard."

Mamacita Gomez appeared at our table laden down with dishes and bowls. "Careful with the *salsas,"* I warned. I pointed. "That one is basically liquid *jalapenas.* The yellowish one, *tomatillo,* clears the

sinuses wonderfully. Take it easy or your rectum will have nasty things to say about your esophagus."

She dipped into the *tomatillo,* tasted, then came back for more. "This is marvellous!" she said through a mouthful of stew.

"The only thing close to it is Kentucky burgoo."

WE ATE IN SILENCE THEN. IT WAS NINE P.M. WHEN WE finished. Outside, the *salsas* and the night's heat had me in a healthy glow. A couple of perspiration-patches on Jean's white dress indicated that she wasn't totally fireproof, either.

We walked to the Hotel Rosado and went up to her room, 214. Inside it, for the first time she looked at me doubtfully. "You'll sleep in the chair?" she asked.

"No," I said. "You'll sleep in the chair. I'll take the bed. I need my rest."

I was testing, and she responded. "I don't care for that arrangement, Mr. Stark." She said it coolly, in the tone of one accustomed to giving orders. "I'll take a shower and then I'll take the bed."

She looked as though she was sorry as soon as she'd said it. We both knew it didn't conform with her pitch to me up to now, but I pretended not to have noticed. "There's a small problem with your program," I said. "The water in the hotel is turned off at eight p.m."

She looked down at herself in dismay. "I've *got* to have a shower!"

I pointed to her handbag. "In this life we have to pay for our sinful pleasures. A hundred pesos will take care of the stationary engineer and get the water turned on for fifteen minutes."

"Mordida," she said.

"Exactly. He has to feed his family."

She handed me a 100-peso bill. I went down into the bowels of the hotel and found Emilio at his poker game. "The right wing," I told him, handing him the bill. Emilio had more bypasses on the hotel's water lines than a schoolteacher has apples.

"Si, senor," he said gravely. We exchanged good wishes about each other's families for three generations back. The fact that neither of us had one made no difference in the exchange of Mexican courtesies. I went back upstairs and settled down in the hallway with my back against the door of 214.

About twenty minutes later the door opened and Jean Westmore looked down at me. Her hair was plastered to her skull, a situation which leaves most women looking like poodles, but not even that could dull the impact of this girl's looks. "You don't happen to think you're overdoing this watchdog-what-of-the-night gig?" she asked.

"How can you expect me to stay inside and inflict upon myself the impact of your ravishing beauty?" I asked in a sorrowful tone.

Her stare could have peeled the bark from an oak tree. Then she pointed her forefinger at me and snapped her middle finger in a trigger-pulling movement. "Bang," she said. She drew back inside and closed the door. And bolted it.

I waited until things quieted down inside the room before I sneaked downstairs to a pay telephone.

When I went back upstairs I knew that Judge Westmore had never had a daughter, acknowledged or otherwise.

I SMOKED ONE AND THREE-QUARTER PACKS OF CIGARettes during the rest of the night. Nothing happened. Something should have happened. The fact that it didn't made me wonder if I was losing my touch.

At 7:00 A.M. I banged on the door and wakened Jean. "I'm going over to my place to shower and change," I told her when she looked out at me again. "Get dressed. Mexican picnics start early."

I was back in an hour and halfway down the corridor which led to Room 214 when I heard a muffled scream. I broke into a run. It shouldn't be happening in broad daylight, but—

The door of 214 was ajar. I burst through the doorway, still gaining momentum. I could see Jean being held down in the chair by a man in a dark blue suit who was standing behind her. He had her left arm pulled up behind her back while he clamped her mouth shut with his free hand.

I charged into the middle of the room like some idiot knight from the Field of the Cloth of Gold. I was reaching for the Jean-holding type when something smashed into the side of my head. I went reeling into the wall. A second blow to the back of my neck sent me to my knees. I had a quick look at another dark blue suit as the sap hurtled toward my head again, and then the lights went out.

I CAME TO ON MY BACK ON THE HOTEL ROOM FLOOR.

Lieutenant Juan Casado-Marin of the Juarez police was standing over me. He's a slender, dark-skinned man with shiny black hair and eyes that always seem half-closed. His custom-tailored uniform glittered with more braid than an Argentine admiral's. Casado-Marin wore the usual yanqui-go-home expression he always seemed to favor in his contacts with me.

A dozen or so people were in the corridor and the crowded open doorway. The lieutenant went over and closed the door in their faces. I

hoisted myself to a sitting position, noting belatedly that we were alone in the room. Jean and the two dark blue suits had disappeared. *"Que pasa?"* Casado-Marin snapped when he returned.

"No se," I told him. "I don't know what happened."

He kicked me in the ribs with his broad-toed shoe. His soccer club coach would have been proud of him. I sang him a song of Mexican-Spanish epithets, but I made no move toward retaliation. There is no one more powerful than a Mexican police official if he steers clear of politics. Literally, he is answerable to no one.

"A group went down the rear fire escape and drove off," he informed me. "Two men and a woman. You know I'm your only friend in this town. You may have acquaintances, but I'm your friend; otherwise you wouldn't be in town."

What could I say since it was true?

"Tell me what happened here," he commanded. He kicked me again, unaffectionately.

"Lieutenant," I said in what I hoped was a persuasive tone. "I would dislike putting you to the expense of hiring a bodyguard. I would seriously dislike putting myself to the expense of purchasing a rifle and waiting in roadside bushes until you passed in your car. Can we talk without athleticism?"

His face darkened but he went over and sat down in the chair. It was the only kind of language a weasel like Casado-Marin understood. "Tell me," he said curtly.

"With pleasure," I lied.

I told him about the immediate past presence of the two men I'd found in the room plus a straight-faced version of the comic-book story Jean had told me. Somehow I neglected to mention her $5000 advance as well as the fact I was supposed to kidnap a Mexican national from the town cemetery.

My only friend shook his head when I completed the tale. "This El Cuchillo—" he paused "*—es un hombre muy malo.*"

"We both know he's a vanilla badass compared to you, lieutenant," I buttered him up.

I got up from the floor and went into the bathroom. I put my head under the tap a couple of times. I was wearing a couple of knots but the skin was unbroken. I found it interesting that Mexican police carried wooden clubs for use against their own people but padded saps for persuading gringos. The sap had left me unmarked although I didn't think I could say the same for the lieutenant's shoe.

"Who do you think the blue suits were?" I asked him when I went back out into the room.

"Friends of El Cuchillo?" Casado-Marin hazarded. He sounded bored.

"He'd have just had her killed." The lieutenant shrugged elaborately. "Tom Constanza wouldn't have cared about the girl's reward offer," I went on. "But you'd think it would want to make him silence his hired gun."

"So your proposal is that these two here were after El Cuchillo?" The lieutenant's smile was amused. "Why would they take the senorita?"

"Maybe they couldn't find El Cuchillo, but knowing he'd want the reward offer stopped, maybe they decided to use the girl as bait."

"That's a lot of maybes."

"How did you happen to arrive so—ahh—providentially, lieutenant?" I found I had a definite interest in his reply.

He flapped a hand loosely. I was boring him again. "I was in the hotel, visiting a lady friend, and I heard the noise. What is your next move in this—this affair, Stark? I fail to see a profit in it for you. Although I'm sure a clever *contrabandista* like you will try to think of something."

I said nothing. Casado-Marin got up from the chair and walked to the door. He waved to me airily just before he disappeared down the corridor. I was relieved to see him go. If the two hoods were really after El Cuchillo, they had probably forced Jean to tell them where she expected to find him. I had to get to the cemetery. And if it wasn't El Cuchillo they were after, I had to get there even faster.

I HAD DRIVEN BACK TO THE HOTEL ROSADO IN MY CAR. I went downstairs and pulled out of the sad-looking parking lot and broke the speed limit heading south. I checked automatically to see whether a car was following me or if anyone might be using a more sophisticated front-end tail, but there was nothing.

There were already a few parked cars alongside the low wall of the cemetery when I arrived. Families were placing flowers on graves, or searching for markers small by U.S. standards, only a few standing as high as 18 inches. Some families were already spreading out the contents of their picnic baskets.

I removed my sport jacket so I'd look more like the white-shirted men moving among the graves. I removed my .38 from the glove compartment and slipped it into the waistband of my slacks, then pulled the shirt out to blouse it over the weapon and conceal it. I left the car and stepped over the low stone wall. I moved past group after group, always with an eye on the narrow roadway entering the cemetery, studying the newly-arriving cars.

A white four-door sedan attracted my attention by driving into the grounds and along a dirt trail to the caretaker's cottage. By far the majority of visiting cars had remained outside. No one got out of the white sedan, but I could see a blue suit at the wheel and another in the rear with a blonde woman.

I began to run toward the sedan, pulling up my shirt to get my .38 into my hand. Families of mourners melted away from around me, the elders pulling their children along with them. The driver of the sedan saw me coming and threw open his door. I dropped down behind one of the taller grave markers. The driver emerged into the open, tugging at a shoulder holster.

He was just at comfortable pistol-range distance. I lined him up and fired. He pitched forward onto his face. I put a slug through the sedan's left front tire and two more into the radiator. The sedan wasn't going anywhere.

The second blue suit agreed with me. He leaped from the car on the side away from me. He sprinted toward the caretaker's cottage, keeping the sedan between himself and me. He never made it. There were two loud claps of thunder and the running man tried to twist two ways at once. He ended up in a crumpled heap.

LIEUTENANT CASADO-MARIN CAME INTO VIEW FROM BEhind the cottage. The gun in his hand was pointing skyward. I almost expected him to pull it down and blow smoke from the muzzle, western-style. He leaned into the sedan and said something to the rear-seat occupant.

I was walking toward him when he turned toward me. He was holstering his gun but not before I saw it was a silver-plated Colt .45. A .45 slug in the ankle will kill a man from shock alone. I slipped my .38 back into my waistband. Anything for *la politesse*.

"Que tal?" Casado-Marin asked me.

"Okay," I said. "How's the girl?"

"Frightened, but apparently just a bit roughed up." He glanced around the cemetery. "We'll have to hope El Chuchillo wasn't scared away."

It seemed like a forlorn hope. The majority of the mourners had fled the cemetery completely. Jean climbed out of the sedan. She stepped over the body of the man I'd killed en route to me. She didn't look frightened to me. She looked angry.

"Let me handle this," Casado-Marin said as four uniformed police jumped from a just-arrived van and charged us, carbines poised.

"Be my guest," I told him.

"I'll say you killed them both in a case of justifiable homicide," he went on. "It saves me a lot of red tape if a gringo is on the books for killing them both."

I listened very, very carefully to the rapid-fire Spanish in which he addressed the police sergeant. The law of Mexico is the Napoleonic Code by which a man is guilty until he proves his innocence. Depending upon what Casado-Marin said. I could land in a Mexican prison and rot there for two or three years without even seeing a lawyer before my case came to trial.

But the lieutenant told it like he said he would. He used his rank to hurry the proceedings along, and he even told the sergeant that he, Casado-Marin, would take our statements, Jean's and mine.

The three of us strolled toward my car when the police van departed. "Once again you arrive providentially, lieutenant," I said.

"Perhaps I followed you, Senor Stark."

"No one followed me. It's my business to know."

Jean had slipped her left arm around my waist. Her left hand found mine and squeezed lightly. "Oh, what's the use of all the fencing!" she exclaimed. "I feel miserable that we weren't able to capitalize on the information Lieutenant Casado-Marin gave me."

The lieutenant was staring at me unfondly. "Give me a lift to my car," he ordered with his usual imperiousness.

I tossed him my car keys. "You drive," I told him. Jean and I climbed into the rear seat. Casado-Marin rolled us around to the rear of the cemetery where his shiny Mercedes was hidden from view. I leaned forward and placed the muzzle of my .38 against the base of the lieutenant's skull.

"Don't twitch," I said. "Or I'll float your brains onto the windshield." I nudged Jean. "Meet El Cuchillo."

"I know," she said. "Now."

"This carrion was hired by Tom Costanza to kill Judge Westmore, whom you'll be happy to know is not your father. When you showed up in Juarez with your ad, he decided to knock off your fifty thousand, and you. He sacrificed two of his own private army outfitted with cops' equipment for two reasons. I'd managed to come between you, but more importantly he didn't have the reward money."

"I was a day late and a dollar short on the whole thing!" Jean exclaimed. "I'm furious with myself!"

"This jerk here doesn't even have any imagination," I went on. "Is it likely that a man nicknamed The Knife would kill the judge with a .45 cannon? He's probably so sure of himself that he didn't even change barrels to confuse a ballistics test."

CASADO-MARIN SPOKE FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE I'D laid my .38 on him. There was sweat on his face and his voice was shaky. "You'll never get out of the country without my help!" he said hoarsely.

I spoke as if he wasn't there. "The judge was killed in Mexico but his body was found in the states. Who else but our boy here has a shiny badge, a special border pass, and an official car to move a body across the border?"

Casado-Marin had heard enough. He went for his shoulder holster as I'd hoped. I might even have overdone it a trifle with the butt of my .38 on his head, although considering Round One at the Hotel Rosado I didn't really think so.

I was surprised to find Jean tugging at my .38. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I want a whack at him, too!"

"Hey, baby, your people are going to want to talk to this type, long and loud. You've got to preserve the pieces."

She subsided, but reluctantly.

"FBI?" I asked her.

"No."

"Treasury?"

"No."

"Secret Service?"

"No."

"That leaves only one agency," I sighed.

"Your agency, Stark."

"My ex-agency," I corrected her. "They fired my ass."

"You're a legend in your own time around the bureau," she said. When I looked at her, she was smiling. "The only man who ever bellowed at the staff of the Congressional Oversight Committee when they suggested he appear with a lawyer: 'For fourteen years my lawyers have been Smith & Wesson and I intend to keep it that way!'"

"There was a small slippage of temper," I admitted. "The judge was carrying for the agency when he went down into Mexico?"

"Correct."

"So Casado-Marin wound up with papers he figured he could sell. You can bet someone is on his way in from Cuba right now to study the contents."

"That's why they sent me down here."

"Whoever sent you down here with that silly-sounding story should have his butt turned up for the fraternity paddle."

"I think they underestimated Casado-Marin. Like I did at first. It

gives me the shivers that I almost blew this assignment."

"So you made a fast recovery."

"You'll get him back across the border for me?"

"No. You will. I'll put him in the trunk of his Mercedes, which will get you past the *aduana,* and then you just turn over the Mercedes to your colleagues on our side. Your side. And tell your boss to have the Mercedes dismantled with tweezers because Mexican officials don't trust banks with anything more than a little cash in an account they can overdraw. There's a chance the papers they want to talk to Casado-Marin about are in his car."

"I'll tell him."

"Then you can tell him you cleaned up the whole load of codswallop down here."

"The whole load?"

"Sure. Think about it. Casado-Marin can't prove that he killed the judge in Mexico, but his gun will prove that he did kill him. And once he's in the states with the stink that will be attached to him, nobody down here will care how he got there. No ambassadorial exchanges, right? He'll try to earn a life sentence with a chance for parole by doing a lot of talking about Tom Constanza. When he does, the Mexican government will stop Costanza's clock. And there you'll be, the cat lickin up the cream."

She was silent a moment, thinking it through.

"It's time now for you to say 'How can I ever thank you!'" I said to her. "And I'll say 'Besides paying me the rest of my fee?' And you'll say 'Of course!' And I'll say 'We'll work out something when you get back here from the border.'"

She was smiling again. "The atmosphere around the agency has changed these days, you know. We have a few guys on their second tours of duty."

"Not me. Didn't you ever learn that there's no antidote for the second snakebite? Besides, I'm too busy down here. It will be a long time before I run out of marks." I opened the car door. "It'll only take me a minute to dump this rat into the trunk of the Mercedes."

"I'm serious in what I said," she remarked when she was ready to leave.

"No comprendre, senorita."

But I did have kind of a mixed-up feeling when she drove away. ●

He turned to run, but in an instant he was engulfed by a sudden blast of hot air, as if someone had flung open the grate of a giant furnace, and then a BANG like a pair of giant hands slapping his ears, and he was knocked forward, face-down on the asphalt!

The Man In The Trunk

by MEL WASHBURN

WHEN HARRY BROWN WORKED A LATE-NIGHT STAKEOUT with one of the rookies, he liked to tell stories to keep awake. Most of his tales were about the peculiar people and strange situations naturally encountered in police work. Some of them were about the eccentricities of his fellow officers. But his favorite story of all, the one he would uncork at three A.M. when the rookie was just taking the first bitter sip of his seventeenth cup of stale coffee, was about Wayne Albrecht, the most ruthless man Harry had ever worked with.

These events took place about twelve years ago, when Harry, a seasoned street cop, was just starting out in the detective side of the business. He'd spent eight years as a patrolman, then gotten booted out of his precinct house and had been assigned—really it was more like being exiled—as a special investigator with the County Prosecutor's office.

This office was full of young lawyer/politicians, all of them ambitious, on the make, willing to do anything for the big conviction and a place in the headlines. And of the whole steely-eyed, ratchet-jawed bunch, Wayne Albrecht was definitely the most ruthless. He was your

typical aggressive Aryan, lean and muscular, with blonde hair, fair skin, and too many teeth, while Harry himself was more your pudgy Celt, low to the ground and good in a fight, with a lumpy, Irish-potato nose that would turn a deeper shade of red with each passing year. Albrecht was not Harry's type, but for some reason, they took a liking to each other and often worked together.

"I mean," Harry would say, chuckling and shaking his head, "this guy wrote the book on dirty tricks, especially when it came to interrogation. He would play brother against brother or mother against son, keeping each of them in a separate room. Then he'd go shuttling back and forth, lying to each about how the other was selling them down the river. He would browbeat and wheedle and plead. He'd do anything to get the story out of them. He was just that ruthless."

Harry had admired Albrecht, though grudgingly. *I can learn from this guy,* he'd thought. And he'd tried to copy Albrecht's style. Until finally, without meaning to, the two of them had played so ruthlessly that they'd brought about a man's death.

And that was the last time the two of them ever worked together.

IT STARTED AT THE AIRPORT, WHERE THE STAFF WAS complaining about a car that had been left in their parking lot for six or seven days, parked at the edge of the lot. It was a grey-on-black Cadillac with no license plates, and it just reeked something awful.

The sheriff's police thought at first that it might be the odor of fifty pounds of ripe cheese or perhaps a slice of beef some clown had forgotten to take out of his car trunk before he got on an airplane. But when they got the trunk pried open, they discovered the problem was something else altogether, something terrible.

So they called the County Prosecutor's office.

Which was how Harry Brown first met Sam Hughes. He was a tall man, late middle-aged, with grey hair and a quiet attitude of inner strength, a refreshing change, for Harry, from the yappy, aggressive young men in the prosecutor's office. Hughes was half-partner in a small restaurant supply business, and the Cadillac had been registered to his company. "So we were hoping," Harry told him, "that you'd be able to identify the corpse we found in the trunk."

"I'm afraid I probably will," said Hughes sadly. "This was my partner's car, Scott Angilello. He's been missing for eight days now. Sam's gone off on 'lost weekends' before, but never for this long a time."

"Then he may be our man," agreed Harry soberly as he led Hughes down an echoing basement passageway and into the pathology lab—a cold, fluorescent-lit room with white tile walls and stainless-steel furni-

ture. As they entered, a disgusting, biting stench attacked the membranes of their noses and made their eyes water despite the little cotton masks which they were wearing over nose and mouth.

"You better prepare yourself," Harry warned Hughes as he began to unzip the worn and creased rubber body-bag on the center table. "This isn't going to be pretty."

"I'm sure it isn't," Hughes said.

"And believe me it wasn't," Harry told Wayne Albrecht later that day. "In fact, it was just hideous, the way the guy was black all over, all swollen and putrid. But I have to give Hughes credit. This was his business partner lying there with a bullet hole in the middle of what used to be his face. He wasn't easy to identify. But Hughes looked the thing over carefully and made a positive ID."

"Well, that's good," said Albrecht coldly. "Now that the stiff is identified, I can get a court order to look into his personal bank accounts, go through his tax records, the works. Somebody murdered him for a reason, and we're going to find out who they were and what their reason was."

"And we did, too," Harry would tell the rookie years later. They found that, besides his restaurant supply business, the dead victim had been a partner in a couple of sleazy massage parlors. His associate there had been Lennie Cevallo, a well-known mafia chief.

And Harry learned on the streets of the Tenderloin, where these massage parlors were located, that Angilello had had a bad habit of some kind, probably cocaine, which he had been supporting by skimming money off those massage parlors.

So it was pretty obvious to Harry and Albrecht that Cevallo had had Angilello killed, because skimming was something no mafioso could stand for. And a gruesome death was the inevitable penalty.

The only problem was that Albrecht had no solid evidence of Cevallo's guilt. He needed an eyewitness to the murder, but none could be found. Or else he needed a witness who could tie Angilello and Cevallo together, maybe someone who had been privy to Angilello's secret financial dealings or had overheard him being threatened by Cevallo.

"But where are you going to find a witness like that?" Harry asked Albrecht. "I mean, this Angilello guy, he didn't have a family, a girlfriend or anything. He had his legitimate business, his illegitimate business, and his cocaine habit. That was all."

"No, Harry," Albrecht corrected, "he had another partner too, one beside Lennie Cevallo, who probably knew about everything."

"You mean Hughes? You think he was mixed up in those massage

parlors too?"

"It stands to reason, doesn't it?"

"Well, yeah, it would, except that Hughes doesn't seem the type at all."

"They never do, Harry. But I'd like to shake his tree a little, just to see what falls out."

"And we didn't have to wait long for our chance," Harry would tell the rookie years later.

ABOUT A WEEK AFTER THE DISCOVERY OF THE MAN IN the trunk, Hughes came to Albrecht's office with an unhappy look on his face and an anonymous note in his hand. "You next unless . . ." it said, all spelled out in letters clipped from magazines.

"I just have the feeling," Hughes said, sitting down next to Albrecht's desk in the hard wooden chair usually reserved for suspected felons, "that this is all connected somehow with my partner's death. It doesn't take much imagination to realize that he died, as the papers might say, 'in a gangland-style killing.' And now it looks as if the gangsters are threatening me."

"Why do you suppose they'd do that?" Albrecht asked innocently.

"I really can't imagine."

"Perhaps they think you owe them something," Albrecht suggested. "Did you profit somehow from Mr. Angilello's demise?"

"Hardly a profit," Hughes smiled ironically. "My partner died owing our company money. He'd run up quite an expense account, those last few months."

"And did you have knowledge," Albrecht continued, "of his criminal connections?"

"I don't have knowledge of them even now. I'm only inferring their existence from the manner of his death."

"And you won't tell us a thing about them?"

"I just said, I can't."

"I don't believe him," Albrecht told Harry when Hughes had left the office. "He was in it up to his neck, and now Cevallo is coming after him for the money Angilello skimmed. Hughes knows all about it. He just isn't ready to talk with us yet." He scratched his chin thoughtfully, then smiled. "I want you to go to work on this case from another angle. Help me get a hook into Mr. Innocent Citizen Hughes."

AND SO TWO DAYS LATER HARRY WAS LEANING HIS elbows on the faded and stained oak bar of a tavern on Industrial Avenue, across the street from Hughes' office and warehouse.

"So where did you say you worked, George?" he asked blearily. There were six or seven cardboard coasters stacked next to Harry's ashtray and the bartender had just set another brandy and soda in front of him.

"H. and A. Restaurant Supply," said George. He was a little baldheaded man with a weak chin and thick eyeglasses. "I'm the bookkeeper over there."

"H. and A.?" repeated Harry. "Stands for Hughes and Angilello, doesn't it?"

George's eyes blinked sleepily behind his coke-bottle lenses. It was almost ten at night and he'd been drinking steadily since he and Harry and struck up a casual conversation at half past five. "Thash right. Hughes and . . . "

"But Angilello died, didn't I hear?"

George nodded slowly. "Very shad. He was a wunnerful man, but an awful crook. Almos' bankrupt the company before he died. Very shad."

"I guess this Hughes must be a little shady too, huh? I mean him and Angilello were partners in everything, right?"

George's face went blank. "They were? Well, I'll be darned." His head sank slowly until his chin touched his chest, then he jerked suddenly awake again. "As far as I knew, Mr. Hughes was as straight as an arrow. And you say he was . . . I never . . . " His eyes slid shut and his chin touched his chest again.

THE NEXT MORNING HARRY HAD AN AWFUL HEADACHE and his mouth felt all full of cotton and bird feathers, but he rushed down to the office anyway, anxious to tell Wayne Albrecht what he'd learned.

But Albrecht wasn't impressed. "So Hughes' own bookkeeper doesn't know he was crooked? So what? I still think Hughes can give me the goods on Lennie Cevallo. All he has to do is sweat a little more, which believe me he's going to do."

And sweat Hughes did. Also bled a little.

The way he told it later, he had gotten home early from the office, stopped his car in the driveway, and gotten out to open the garage door. But then a peculiar hissing sound had caught his attention, and he looked down to see a thin wisp of grey smoke oozing out from under the door.

He turned to run, but in an instant he was engulfed by a sudden blast of hot air, as if someone had flung open the grate of a giant furnace, and then a bang like a pair of giant hands slapping his ears, and he was

knocked forward, face-down on the asphalt.

"I'm lucky to be alive," he said. An angry red bruise stained his cheek where he'd hit the asphalt. And all the hair had been singed from the back of his head. "And afterwards, in my mailbox, I found this."

It was another note. "Deadline midnight," it said.

"What do you suppose this means?" Albrecht asked.

"I don't know," said Hughes earnestly, "but I was hoping you might assign a policeman to watch over me."

"I'm afraid not," Albrecht explained, "because you're not in the kind of spot where you're entitled to protection. No one's actually assaulted you. We have no evidence that the explosion in your garage wasn't accidental. And these notes you've gotten may be only a prank."

"But my partner was murdered . . . " Hughes pleaded.

"Yes, I know," said Albrecht reasonably, "but that was him, not you. You're just a citizen who's had a run of bad luck, is all. And there's nothing in the official procedures that would let us give you any special consideration. You understand?"

"Yes, I do."

"Though on the other hand," Albrecht continued, "if you could furnish us with some evidence linking your partner's death to some underworld figures . . . "

"But I can't."

"Then I'm truly sorry." Albrecht showed him the door. "Get in touch with me if you change your mind. There're still thirteen hours left until midnight."

"You've put him in a dangerous position," Harry said afterwards.

"Let him sweat a little more," Albrecht sneered. "By eleven-thirty tonight he'll be begging to help us prosecute Lennie Cevallo. I just know he will."

"But suppose he gets killed first? Suppose he's as innocent as he seems?"

Albrecht shrugged his shoulders. "That's the chance we have to take."

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, THE HUGE MAN IN THE BLACK suit—he must have been six-three and his shoulders were broad enough to fill the narrow doorframe—opened the inner door just a crack and stuck his head in. "Say, Mr. C., there's a cop out here," he growled, "name's Harry Brown, wants to see you. Says maybe you remember him."

Coolly, Harry lit a cigar and glanced around the front office of

Cevallo Amusements, a low-ceilinged loft above a bowling alley, crowded with dented steel office furniture, stacks of mouldy cardboard boxes, and a couple of broken vending machines. The two dried-up women and the old man with the green eyeshade looked up curiously at him for a moment, then bowed their heads again over the ledgerbooks and stacks of yellow business forms that littered their desks.

"Yeah I remember him," a low, raspy voice on the other side of the door chuckled. "Let him in."

The large, bull-like man turned to Harry. "Lift your hands," he said, and grasping Harry's wrists, hoisted them to shoulder height. "Leave them up a minute." He patted his large, grimy hands familiarly up and down Harry's body. "Okay."

Harry lowered his arms, glad he'd left his gun and blackjack outside, under the front seat of his car.

"Go on in now."

As the door shut behind him, Harry found himself in a heavily-carpeted sort of parlor with no desk at all, just a coffee table, some easy chairs and a sideboard. "Hi, Mr. Cevallo," he said.

The little man with a wizened, lizard-like face beneath a coal-black hairpiece rose from his chair. "Officer Brown," he rasped heavily. "You're the mutt who gave me a parking ticket, what was it, six, eight months ago?"

"Eight, I think." Harry smiled. "I'm glad you remember."

The old man smiled too, holding his dry lips tight so that no teeth showed. "I oughta have Bull come in here and break both your arms. You're the only cop ever had the nerve to give me a ticket. And when your sergeant tore it up, you reported him. That's what the grapevine said."

"It was true."

"So how'd things turn out?"

Harry's smile broadened. "I got booted out of the precinct. Captain said I had a bad attitude."

The old man nodded. "Captain was right. So what are you doing here now?"

"I came to warn you that Bull out there, or whoever you've got doing it, should lay off Sam Hughes."

The old man's eyes blinked drily. "Sam Hughes? Never heard of him."

"He's the business partner of Scott Angilello, or was until Angilello died."

"The Angilello who turned up dead in the back of his own car? That bum?"

"That's the one."

"He was a thief." The old man's green eyes hardened. "He got what he deserved."

"Maybe so. But Sam Hughes is a different story."

"That could be, I don't know. But I can tell you, on my mother's grave . . . " The old man touched a crucifix on the wall beside him. Touched it gently with two fingers and then touched the gleaming white, stiffly-starched shirt above his breastbone, "that I don't know a thing about Hughes. None of my people is bothering him. I guarantee it."

Harry studied the old man's face for a moment. "I believe you," he said at last.

"That's fine." The man sat down stiffly in his chair. "Now get out of here, if you want to stay healthy. And don't never come back."

AS HE DROVE HIS CAR DOWNTOWN, HARRY SMOKED thoughtfully on a cheap cigar and wondered who it could be that was persecuting Sam Hughes. First they send a message, then then bomb his house. Now they send another message, and then they bomb . . . what? His house again? His car? His business? And what did they get out of it? Harry couldn't imagine.

When he got back to the office, he wanted to talk things over with Albrecht, but the ambitious young lawyer had left for the day already. Gone to some kind of political meeting at a Michigan Avenue hotel, his secretary said. "He'll be back late tonight, though."

"Oh, yeah? When?"

"Eleven o'clock sharp, he told me. Said he's expecting an important phone call before midnight." She raised an eyebrow. "He seemed awfully pleased with himself, somehow."

Harry closed his eyes and watched a lightbulb come on inside his head. It had been Albrecht all along. He'd sent the notes and planted the bomb in order to frighten Hughes into turning state's evidence against Lennie Cevallo. "That ruthless weasel," he whispered to himself.

"Who's that?" asked the secretary.

Harry smiled grimly. "Who else?"

"Well at least," he thought as he drove home, "I can stop worrying about Hughes. It's clear that Albrecht doesn't intend to follow through on his midnight deadline. He's just going to sit back and wait for Hughes' call."

But once home and fed, Harry couldn't relax. *I am overlooking something,* he thought. But try as he might, he couldn't think what it

was. He tried to read, but he couldn't concentrate. Tried to watch TV, but it only made him restless. Tried to sleep, but he couldn't keep his eyes closed.

So about eleven-thirty, he pulled his rumpled blue suit on, got into his car, and started out for the office. But about half way there, he remembered suddenly what it was he was overlooking. The whole thing made sense at last—grim, terrible sense. Harry glanced at his watch: eleven-forty-five. Perhaps he could still be in time.

HE FLICKED ON THE RED LIGHT, CRANKED UP THE SIREN, and drove his tired grey unmarked squad car as fast as it would go down to Industrial Avenue, bumping and rattling across the railroad tracks, fishtailing through the intersections, flying dangerously down the straightaways. But as he rounded the last corner, he could see that he was too late.

A film of black smoke hung over the street, obscuring the street lamps and reducing their white glare to a pale orange. A half dozen fire engines and ladder trucks sat clustered at the end of the block, their diesel engines chugging. Heavy hose lines, round and swollen with water, crisscrossed over the pavement, with here and there a spray of water hissing from a loose coupling. The gutters ran with ash-grey water. And the brown-brick warehouse, its roof already collapsed in the middle, spewed forth smoke and flame from every window.

Harry showed his badge to the cop putting up a barricade behind the last fire engine. "What happened?" he asked as if he didn't already know.

"Place went up like a firecracker," the cop shouted above the chug of the fire engine's diesel. "Some guy set the place on fire. But he must have been an amateur: the thing blew up in his face."

"Where is the guy?"

"Paramedics took him to St. Elizabeth's Burn Center. But he ain't going to make it: I seen him when the firemen drug him out; he was nothing but scorched from head to foot."

"So who was it?" the rookie would ask Harry Brown years later. "Was it some mafia thug doing the dirty work for Lennie Cevallo? Or was it Albrecht, the Assistant Prosecutor?"

"Neither one," Harry shook his head sadly. "It was Hughes himself. He'd learned, during the week or so between Angilello's disappearance and the discovery of his corpse in that car, that his partner had been bleeding the company of cash, just as he'd bled those massage parlors in the Tenderloin. It was only a matter of time until bankruptcy and ruin would overwhelm the company Hughes had spent his whole life

building. But when the corpse was found, with all the suspicious circumstances, he saw his chance. He decided to burn down the warehouse and collect the insurance. So he laid a trail of false clues pointing towards Angilello's criminal associates."

"He even set his own garage on fire?"

"Yes, he did. And yet at the same time the honest, decent side of his nature wanted us to stop him. He gave us all sorts of clues, practically begged us to assign a cop to watch him . . . "

"But Albrecht wouldn't do it."

"No, he was intent on other things, so he overlooked the obvious."

"Which cost Hughes his life."

"And costs me a night's sleep, whenever I'm thinking about it. Such as right now." Harry would glance down at his watch, then look across the darkened street towards whatever desolate location he and the rookie had staked out. "You can catch a nap if you want to, I'll be able to stay awake without any help tonight." ●

The relations between us in those latter days were peculiar. He was a man of habits, narrow and concentrated habits, and I had become one of them. As an institution I was like the violin, the shag tobacco, the old black pipe, the index books, and others perhaps less excusable. When it was a case of active work and a comrade was needed upon whose nerve he could place some reliance, my role was obvious. But apart from this I had uses. I was a whetstone for his mind. I stimulated him. He liked to think aloud in my presence. His remarks could hardly be said to be made to me—many of them would have been as appropriately addressed to his bedstead—but nonetheless, having formed the habit, it had become in some way helpful that I should register and interject. If I irritated him by a certain methodical slowness in my mentality, that irritation served only to make his own flame-like intuitions and impressions flash up the more vividly and swiftly. Such was my humble role in our alliance.

—The Adventure of the Creeping Man
from THE CASEBOOK OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

For two weeks the three men had planned for this day, carefully timing the train as it left the station until they'd decided on a spot to attack it. They were confident that nothing would go wrong—as long as the girl didn't get in the way!

The Great Little Train Robbery

by MICHAEL BRACKEN

WHEN BUCK JOHNSON ROLLED OUT OF BED AND HIS FEET slapped against the cold hardwood floor, his thoughts weren't on that day's scheduled train robbery. Instead, he concentrated on leaving the bedroom without waking his wife, who was snuggled warmly on the far side of the bed.

Quietly, Buck gathered up his clothes from the high-back wooden chair and made his way out of the bedroom and down the stairs to the bathroom where he took a quick shower, brushed his teeth, and ran a comb through his long, unruly brown hair. He tried to comb out the tangle of beard he'd grown just for this job, but he quickly quit when the teeth of his comb caught in the knots of hair and pulled at his baby-soft cheeks.

After a quick cup of instant coffee and a stale Danish he'd reheated in the microwave, Buck pulled on his dusty, brown cowboy boots and finished tucking his red plaid shirt into the waistband of his faded Levi's. He tightened his wide leather belt one more notch and patted his large, firm abdomen.

Buck quickly scanned the kitchen, confirming that he'd turned the stove off. He gathered up his bandana and his chaps, then he walked out the front door and down the steps to where his battered pickup was parked at the curb. The engine protested twice, then turned over. Buck sat in the cab of the truck and waited for the engine to warm itself against the cold morning.

Finally, Buck dropped the old truck into gear and pulled away from the curb. If things went well, he'd be back with his family before the sun set, but Buck had been involved in too many robberies to expect everything to work according to schedule. Something was different every time and he knew there was no way to be prepared for the unexpected. No way to be prepared, that is, except by constant practice and by being alert to everything that happened.

AFTER DRIVING THROUGH TOWN AND THEN ANOTHER thirty miles up and down the mountains, Buck turned off the main highway and drove through the open gate in a chain-link fence. The pickup bumped and bounced the next four miles along a road that alternated between pot-holes and asphalt, until he turned again onto a dirt lane that extended almost a hundred yards to a small tin shanty.

Buck pulled his truck to a halt beside a station wagon and noted with satisfaction that Roger Wilcox had already arrived. The thick black smoke pouring from the stove pipe informed him that Roger had already started a fire in the pot-belly stove.

Buck stomped into the shanty and clapped his big hands together. "Sure is cold this morning," he said.

Roger looked up from his morning paper. "Don't that beat all," he said as he shook his head. Long black hair fell into his eyes and he brushed it away. Like Buck, Roger sported a full beard that brushed his chest whenever he looked down. "Caught the weatherman this morning, though. Should warm up by nine."

Buck grunted and stood by the pot-belly stove. "When'd you get here?"

Roger consulted his wristwatch. "Almost an hour ago," he said. "I couldn't sleep. The first day always makes me nervous."

"Me, too." Buck smiled.

"Larry should be here soon," Roger said. "He's got the guns with him."

For two weeks the three men had been planning for this day, carefully timing the train as it left the station until they'd decided on a spot just after a series of curves that brought the train to a slow crawl and just before the train could accelerate down a long, flat stretch of

track. At nine each morning the train's whistle would throw a piercing scream into the air and the engine would chug out of the last curve.

For two weeks the men had planned and practiced until each knew his part as well as he knew his own name. Buck was confident that the day would pass without any goof-ups.

THEY BOTH HEARD THE THIRD CAR AT THE SAME TIME. A moment later Larry Cavanaugh opened the door while juggling three carbines and a pair of holsters with six-shooters in them. His own six-shooter was in a holster strapped to his hip.

Larry dumped his load on the shanty's only table, then wiped at his handlebar moustache. Larry was stocky like the other two men, but he wasn't nearly as tall.

Another car door slammed and a moment later a petite blonde followed Larry through the shanty door.

Buck collapsed into a chair. "What's she doing here?" he asked.

"Boss's orders," Larry responded.

"At the last minute?" Buck asked. "We've been through this thing almost a hundred times. We don't need anybody messing it up."

"I'll stay out of the way," the blonde said as she struggled to unload the black case she had slung over her left shoulder.

"He called last night," Larry said. "What could I say? When the boss wants to send somebody else along, I'm not going to argue with him."

Roger shrugged and returned to his newspaper.

Buck glanced over at the woman. At least she'd been smart enough to dress for the part, unlike the last one the boss had sent along—the one in the spike heels and short skirt who'd never even made it as far as the train tracks.

The blonde had taken out a small pad and a pen and was doodling on it. Buck introduced himself.

"I'm Betty Brandon," she told him when it was her turn for introductions. "And don't mind me, honestly. I won't mess up anything."

After that, Buck pulled on his leather chaps and secured them in place. Next he strapped on his sidearm, grateful that Larry had volunteered to clean all the weapons the night before. He pulled the six-shooter from the holster, loaded it with shells from his belt, and returned it to his holster. Buck picked up one of the carbines, balanced it in the palm of one meaty hand and, satisfied with the feel of it, began loading the rifle as well.

"So, how long have you guys been doing this?" Betty asked.

"Four years," Buck said, "It pays the bills."

Larry had been working the longest; almost eight years. Roger had joined in only a few months after Buck when a previous member had quit.

"The first time each year is the hardest," Larry said.

"What do you guys do all winter?" Betty wanted to know.

"Rest," said Roger.

"Live on our savings," Buck said. "Crime does pay, you know."

They all laughed at that, and Betty seemed pleased with his response.

Roger glanced down at his watch and began to load the remaining six-shooter. "It's almost time," he said as he adjusted the leather thong that tied his holster tight against his leg.

THE THREE MEN FILED OUT OF THE SHANTY AND BEGAN the long walk to the train track. Betty gathered up her case and followed them. At the track they split into two groups. Larry took Betty and moved to the northern side of the tracks while Roger and Buck remained on the southern side.

Buck reached into his pocket and pulled out his bandana. He folded it into a triangle and then tied two corners of it behind his head. The bulk of the bandana covered his nose and mouth. Roger did the same thing with his bandana.

At 9:01 a.m. the train whistle screamed.

"Get ready," Buck said to his partner.

As the train rounded the bend, the two of them lept from the bushes and fired their carbines into the air. The engineer saw them and pulled on the train's brakes.

"It's a robbery," the engineer yelled as the train squealed to a halt.

A dozen Instamatics flashed. Fifty preteens squealed with delight. Dozens of parents laughed and pointed toward the two heavy-set men in cowboy suits. Any moment now, Larry would come striding around the end of the train, the silver star on his chest gleaming in the morning sun.

Betty Brandon stood off to the side, out of the robbers' way, snapping photos for the next edition of the town paper. The theme park was officially open for the season when the first great little train robbery occurred. ●

It was a beautiful creation—and worth every penny of the quarter of a million dollars!

The Queen's Necklace

by CHARLES LAND

"QUALITY SPEAKS FOR ITSELF" WAS THE MOTTO ISAK Stone used in his business; a bit homespun for the jewelry business perhaps, but Isak Stone was a bit homespun himself. Not his dress, his grooming was impeccable; but his personality had that down-home friendliness, which seemed to amuse his posh clientele.

Then there was Amanda. He thought of her as a showgirl in tailored clothes; yet she too had a bit of the homespun quality, nothing so colloquial as y'all, rather a warm Southern drawl. She had been with the firm for over six months. Amanda Smith came with an impressive dossier; letters from diamond firms in Amsterdam, Cartier in Paris, and a phone call from South Africa.

In six months, she had become as precious to him as the jewels she sold. His wife had died a year ago; he was lonely in a "shop-talk" sort of way, nothing sentimental, just to talk—as he did with his wife—about the sparkling new ideas he dreamed up for his business.

Actually, Isak Stone was an "idea" man; the secret of his success was the ideas that came to him. His wife used to be a sounding board; any idea that sounded right to her was right for him. Now Amanda was even better—she knew diamonds.

Take the idea he came up with this year: for free, he would present a copy of a Ross Moss design to any customer who purchased one. Not a cheap facsimile, but a replica so exact that only a jeweler could tell. Naturally, Ross Moss created the finest pieces. The idea was prompted by the trend to keep one's jewels in the bank vault and wear their duplicates in paste.

Amanda thought it was a super idea.

Isak proposed to try it out on what he called the Queen's necklace, a cluster of stones worth a quarter of a million. Only a queen could afford it—royalty, movie, TV, or whatever.

Amanda said, "The most perfect stones should go into it, all blue white, a circle of twinkling starlight."

"My dear, you do have a way with words."

"Quality speaks for itself, Mr. Stone."

"My words, exactly."

She said, "I've been going over your catalogue, and I suggest you might use 6-R, a fine marquise diamond, if ever I saw one. You must include the Russian six carat, reputed to have been in the Czarina's collection. I believe it's 12-Z in the catalogue."

Izak beamed at her. "You must have a diamond computer in that pretty head of yours. Suppose you select from our stock the stones to complete a necklace in the $200,000 range."

So Amanda took inventory of the finest jewels and set them aside for the Queen's necklace. The designer was pleased, Mr. Stone was pleased and Amanda was more than pleased.

AS THE QUEEN'S NECKLACE NEARED COMPLETION, ISAK became more and more interested in Amanda, but she firmly kept him on a friendly business relationship. He tried to analyze the attraction. He had never been a girl-chaser; they presented more problems than fun, and she was younger than the son he had lost in the war. That was it: he had always wanted a daughter, and Amanda was subconsciously a daughter image. He could adjust to that; parental problems he could handle.

The day the necklaces arrived, Isak took Amanda into the vault where the necklaces lay side by side.

"God in heaven, it's beautiful," she whispered.

"It is perfect and the paste is perfect. The designer worked on the paste as he created the original."

"This idea of yours, Mr. Stone, is a nice gesture. It should bring you much good will."

"I think so, Amanda. Of course, it would apply only to those pieces that are too valuable to wear."

"Does anyone know that this masterpiece is available?"

"Sure, I've boasted to some of our top clients. The word will spread around. You'll see."

Isak Stone was right, in fact, the next morning at 11:20 a young man came up to Amanda. He wanted to see a diamond necklace. She explained that they had several, just what did he have in mind. He wanted the very finest. He was to be married on June 20th; it was for his bride.

"How lovely," Amanda said. "Our finest necklace is in the $250,000 range."

He handed her his card. She went to the vault for the Queen's Necklace. Amanda arranged it carefully before him on a black velvet tray. He seemed stunned by its beauty. Then he reached for his checkbook.

"I know that your bride will love it," Amanda said, as she returned the necklace to its velvet box. "I'll have the cashier make out the bill. Of course there will be a tax."

Amanda took the Queen's Necklace to Isak Stone. "He wants to pay by check."

Isak smiled. "Cash would be awkward. Who is he?"

"Huntington Morgan IV. Okay?"

"I know the family."

"He's nice looking," Amanda said.

AT LAX, THE PAN AM FLIGHT 33 CLEARED THE RUNWAY at 2:55 that afternoon for Brazil. Amanda and the nice looking young man relaxed in their seats with The Queen's Necklace safely stowed away in Amanda's bag.

"We made it," she said.

He looked into the blue sky. "I spent my last cent for the plane tickets."

"Don't worry honey, the Queen will take care of us."

MEANWHILE, BACK ON RODEO DRIVE, ISAK STONE WAS having a quiet conversation with his designer, Ross Moss.

"You mean Amanda has skipped?"

"I'm convinced of it. She hasn't returned from lunch."

"I thought you trusted her from the beginning."

"When she arrived with those outrageous credentials, I was curious to see how she would work out. She knew diamonds and she could sell."

"What made you suspicious?"

"She let slip one day that she had worked for a firm I knew in New York. I checked and uncovered the story. She left them under a cloud. No charges were brought against her, but they offered no recommendations either. I liked Amanda. I wanted to give her a chance, but I had to be careful."

Ross nodded. "So that's why you had me make two paste necklaces."

"Yes. Poor Amanda will get quite a shock, when she tries to sell hers." ●

Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS by JOHN BALL

In the field of the British "cozy," Catherine Aird has a very special place. She is always readable and witty. Her policemen have an astonishing classical education which keeps them quoting Shakespeare frequently, and Latin occasionally, as they go about their duties, something not likely to be encountered in this country. Her newest work is *Harm's Way,* not to be confused with the American naval story of the same title. Two walkers from the Berebery County Footpath Society are overflown by a crow who drops off his cargo for their edification. It is a human finger. Enter Inspector Sloan and the lightly-regarded Constable Crosby who, this time, exceeds himself. Aird is always fun and, as usual, all her clues are there in plain sight, if you're sharp enough to spot them. All in all, a fresh delight from a master of the game. (Doubleday Crime Club, $11.95)

★ ★ ★

Peter Dickinson has a well-deserved reputation as a crime novelist who often deals with unusual situations in a highly original manner.

His new book, *Death of a Unicorn,* is described as a novel of suspense, but it actually is the story, told in the first person, of a titled young English girl who gladly becomes the mistress of a less than attractive older man. In the second half of the book we meet her again, many years later when she is a successful romantic novelist. That's about it. There is a killing, but it is far off stage and is never resolved. This book, while very well written, puts us more in mind of Kitty Foyle. (Pantheon, $13.95)

★ ★ ★

How many of us would love to step up to a newsstand and buy crisp fresh copies of *Black Mask* magazine when it was fifteen cents a copy! That fabulous opportunity is gone forever, but we can console ourselves with a new book, *The Black Mask Boys,* which presents some excellent background material plus original stories from the legendary magazine. Included among the authors are Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Erle Stanley Gardner, Carroll John Daly (alas, not with Race Williams), Frederick Nebel, Raoul Whitfield, and Paul Cain. Hard-boiled detective fiction rides again, this time on high quality paper and in hard covers. Besides the stories included, there are comprehensive listings of other works published in *Black Mask* by each represented author. These are great data, but where are we going to get the magazines? All this was put together by William F. Nolan, a double Edgar winner whose reputation in the field is totally secure. Please come back, Black Mask; all is forgiven! (Morrow, $16.95)

★ ★ ★

Robert J. Randisi's latest Miles Jacoby book, called *Full Contact,* is obviously about karate. Private eye Jacoby takes on two cases simultaneously: the search for a missing girl in New York and the defense of a Chinese/American friend being held for murder. Before long the two cases are interconnected. Mr. Randisi writes much in the manner of the late Frank Gruber: his events happen thick and fast with frequent coincidences and little time taken for either background or characterization. However his popularity attests to the fact that his style is just fine with his readers, and that's the bottom line. (St. Martins, $13.95)

★ ★ ★

In a fine display of literary virtuosity Michael Hardwick has given us the autobiography of Sherlock Holmes under the challenging title: *Sherlock Holmes: My Life and Crimes.* Together with his wife Millie, the author has delved deep into the Sherlockian world and has pro-

duced ten previous books devoted to the best and wisest detective we shall ever know. He writes exceptionally well and with a genuine expert's grasp of his field. This latest work is profusely illustrated with photographs bearing the times when Holmes was in active practice. The one on page 72 epitomizes the whole Holmes canon. This is a work of loving scholarship that is also immensely readable. There is also a terrifying photograph of the Reichenbach Falls where Holmes had his final encounter with Professor Moriarty. We now have a great and growing literature concerning the Master; this new addition not only adds to it, it is a cornerstone. Very highly recommended to one and all. (Doubleday, $16.95)

★ ★ ★

Elmore Leonard is a novelist who reveals the gritty side of life with sometimes startling realism in action and dialog. He pulls no punches and leaves the reader feeling that he knows his subject matter first hand. His new book *Glitz* shifts in scene from Puerto Rico to the streets and gambling casinos of Atlantic City. Lt. Vincert Mora of the Miami Beach Police has been shot. While recuperating on sick leave he becomes the target of an ex-con whom he sent to prison. Now, seven years later, the man is obsessed with the idea of extracting revenge. A cold blooded murderer and rapist, he is determined to make Mora suffer in every way possible. The dialog is hard and brittle; the situations tight and revealing of what goes on backstage where major gambling activities take place. This is a superior book in the genre, one that holds and builds interest all of the way. (Arbor House, $14.95)

★ ★ ★

The cute title of Ron Goulart's new book, *A Graveyard of My Own,* has nothing to do with the story, except, perhaps, to set the mood. This is a lightweight excursion with commercial artist Burt Kurrie functioning as detective. There is a lot about cartoonists who draw comic strips and the houses that publish them. A pleasant entertainment, but no more. (Walker, $13.95)

★ ★ ★

There are now several books about Dashiell Hammett, including at least two biographies. The newest, called *Private Investigations; the Novels of Dashiell Hammett,* is by Sinda Gregory. It contains an essay on Hammett together with a condensed biography and then a detailed examination of the five novels that he wrote. There are notes, a bibliography, and an index, plus an introduction by Francis M. Nevins, Jr.,

the well-known critic and author. The whole is very readable and reveals careful scholarship. Unfortunately, very little information is provided about the author; additional data would have been welcome. (Southern Illinois University Press, Box 3697, Carbondale, Illinois 62901. Price not given)

★ ★ ★

PAPERBACK NOTES: It was inevitable that there would be a publishing tie-in with the successful new TV show *Murder She Wrote.* The first volume is now out. It's called *The Murder of Sherlock Holmes* but it's not by Jessica Fletcher; the author is James Anderson who adapted it from the teleplay by Peter S. Fischer. Avon has it for $3.75 . . . The excellent *Murder on Ice* by Ted Wood features again the one-man, one-dog police department of Murphy's Harbour, Ontario. It's at least as good as *Dead in the Water,* which is saying a lot. Don't miss this one. Bantam, $2.95 . . . John Dickson Carr's classic *Arabian Nights Murder* with Dr. Gideon Fell has been reprinted by Collier Books (Macmillan). Carr was, as everyone knows, one of the all time masters of the true puzzle and "impossible" mystery. He is in fine form here, as usual. $3.50 . . . Margery Allingham's most celebrated book, *The Tiger in the Smoke,* is back again, this time in a Bantam edition. The type is quite small, otherwise a welcome reissue. $2.95 . . . Edgar Winner L.A. Morse offers a very tough L.A. private eye in *Sleaze,* a case that mixes, violence, religious fervor, a junk magazine (his client), Tijuana, and X-plus rated videotapes with sex and violence. You won't nap through this Avon original, $2.95 . . . Robert Barnard is both prolific and very good. One of his latest, *School for Murder,* has been reprinted by Dell at $2.95 . . . Another top talent is the veteran Michael Gilbert who never seems to miss. A retired attorney, he has five beautiful daughters in addition to a long string of excellent books. Penguin offers his *The Black Seraphim* for $3.50. Incidentally, Miss Harriett Gilbert, one of the quintet, is also a mystery novelist in her own right as well as a knockout model . . . Francis King used a real case on which to base his *Act of Darkness,* a superior story of murder and sexual passion in India during the final days of British rule. Pocket Books now offers it in paperback. A very good read at $3.95. ●

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